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The King and La Vallière.

THE ROMANCES OF

ALEXANDRE DUMAS

THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK

Being Adventures of

THE VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE

Volume One

The D'Artagnan Romances, VIII

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THE

VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE.

CHAPTER I.

SHOWING WHAT NEITHER THE NAIAD NOR THE DRYAD HAD ANTICIPATED.

De Saint-Aignan stopped at the foot of the staircase which led to the *entresol*, where the maids of honor resided, and to the first floor, where Madame's apartments were situated. Then, by a valet who was passing, he sent to summon Malicorne, who was still with Monsieur. After having waited ten minutes, Malicorne arrived, looking very suspicious and important. The king drew back towards the darkest part of the vestibule. De Saint-Aignan, on the contrary, advanced to meet Malicorne; but at the first words indicating his wish that person drew back abruptly.

"Oh!" he said, "you want me to introduce you into the rooms of the maids of honor?"

"Yes."

"You know very well that I cannot do anything of the kind, without being made acquainted with your object."

"Unfortunately, my dear M. Malicorne, it is quite impossible for me to give you any explanation; you must therefore confide in me as in a friend who got you out of a great difficulty yesterday, and who now begs you to extricate him from one to-day."

"Yet I told you, Monsieur, what I wanted, — that I did not wish to sleep in the open air, — and any honest man might express the same wish; while you, on the contrary, admit nothing."

"Believe me, my dear M. Malicorne," De Saint-Aignan persisted, "that if I were permitted to explain myself, I would do so."

"In that case, my dear Monsieur, it is impossible for me to allow you to enter Mademoiselle de Montalais's apartment."

"Why so?"

"You know why better than any one else, since you caught me on the wall paying my addresses to Mademoiselle de Montalais; it would therefore be an excess of kindness on my part, you will admit, while I am paying attentions to her, to open the door of her room to you."

"But who told you that it was on her account I asked you for the key?"

"For whom, then?"

"She does not lodge there alone, I suppose?"

"No, certainly not."

"She rooms with Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"Yes. But really you have nothing more to do with Mademoiselle de la Vallière than with Mademoiselle de Montalais; and there are only two men to whom I would give this key, — to M. de Bragelonne, if he begged me to give it to him, and to the king, if he ordered me to do so."

"In that case give me the key, Monsieur; I order you to do so," said the king, advancing from the obscurity and partially opening his cloak. "Mademoiselle de Montalais will step down to talk with you, while we go upstairs to Mademoiselle de la Vallière; for, in fact, it is she only whom we require."

"The king!" exclaimed Malicorne, bowing down to the very ground.

"Yes, the king," said Louis, smiling, — "the king, who is as pleased with your resistance as with your capitulation. Rise, Monsieur, and render us the service we request of you."

"I obey, your Majesty," said Malicorne, leading the way up the staircase.

"Get Mademoiselle de Montalais to come down," said the king, "and do not breathe a word to her of my visit."

Malicorne bowed in sign of obedience, and proceeded up the staircase. But the king, after hasty reflection, followed him, and with such rapidity that although Malicorne was already more than half-way up the staircase, the king reached the room at the same moment that he did. He then observed, by the door which remained half open behind Malicorne, La Vallière, lying back in an arm-chair, and in the opposite corner Montalais, who in her dressing-gown was standing before a large mirror, engaged in arranging her hair, and parleying all the while with Malicorne. The king hurriedly opened the door, and entered the room. Montalais called out at the noise made by the opening of the door, and recognizing the king, made her escape. La Vallière, at the sight of him, rose from her seat, like a dead person who had been galvanized, and then fell back again in her arm-chair. The king advanced slowly towards her.

"You wished for an audience, Mademoiselle," he said coldly; "I am ready to hear you. Speak!"

De Saint-Aignan, faithful to his character of being deaf, blind, and dumb, had stationed himself in a corner of the doorway, upon a stool which chance seemed to have left there expressly for him. Concealed by the tapestry which served as a portière, and leaning his back against the wall,

in this way he listened without being seen; resigning himself to playing the part of a good watch-dog, who patiently waits and watches without ever getting in his master's way.

La Vallière, terror-stricken at the king's irritated aspect, again rose, and assuming a posture full of humility and entreaty, murmured, "Forgive me, Sire."

"Eh! Mademoiselle, for what do you wish me to forgive you?" asked Louis.

"Sire, I have been guilty of a great fault; nay, more than a great fault, — a great crime."

"You?"

"Sire, I have offended your Majesty."

"Not the slightest degree in the world," replied Louis.

"I implore you, Sire, not to maintain towards me that terrible seriousness of manner which reveals your Majesty's just anger. I feel that I have offended you, Sire; but I wish to show you that I have not offended you of my own accord."

"In the first place, Mademoiselle," said the king, "in what way can you possibly have offended me? I cannot perceive how. Surely not on account of a young girl's harmless and very innocent jest? You turned the credulity of a young man into ridicule, — it was very natural to do so; any other woman in your place would have done the same."

"Oh! your Majesty overwhelms me by your words."

"And why so?"

"Because, if I had been the author of the jest, it would not have been innocent."

"Well, Mademoiselle, is that all you had to say to me in soliciting an audience?" said the king, as though about to turn away.

Thereupon La Vallière, in an abrupt and broken voice, her eyes burning with her hot tears, made a step towards the king, and said, "Did your Majesty hear everything?"

"Everything, what?"

"Everything I said beneath the royal oak."

"I did not lose a syllable, Mademoiselle."

"And when your Majesty heard me, could you have thought I had abused your credulity?"

"Credulity; yes, indeed, you have selected the very word."

"And your Majesty did not suppose that a poor girl like myself might possibly be compelled to submit to the will of others?"

"Forgive me," returned the king; "but I shall never be able to understand that she, who of her own free will could express herself so unreservedly beneath the royal oak, would allow herself to be influenced to such an extent by the direction of others."

"But the threat held out against me, Sire!"

"Threat! who threatened you? who dared to threaten you?"

"They who have the right to do so, Sire."

"I do not recognize any one as possessing the right to threaten in my kingdom."

"Forgive me, Sire; but near your Majesty, even, there are persons sufficiently high in position to have, or to believe that they have, the right to ruin a young girl without expectations, without fortune, and with only her reputation."

"In what way ruin her?"

"In depriving her of her reputation by disgracefully expelling her from the court."

"Oh, Mademoiselle de la Vallière," said the king,

bitterly, "I prefer those persons who exculpate themselves without incriminating others."

"Sire!"

"Yes; and I confess that I greatly regret to perceive that an easy justification, as your own might be, should have been complicated in my presence by a tissue of reproaches and imputations against others."

"And which you do not believe?" exclaimed La Vallière.

The king remained silent.

"Nay, but tell me!" repeated La Vallière, vehemently.

"I regret to confess it," replied the king, bowing coldly.

The young girl uttered a deep groan, striking her hands together in despair. "You do not believe me, then?" she said to the king, who still answered nothing, while poor La Vallière's features became visibly changed at his continued silence. "Therefore you believe," she said, "that I contrived this ridiculous, this infamous plot of trifling in so shameless a manner with your Majesty?"

"Nay," said the king, "it is neither ridiculous nor infamous, — it is not even a plot; it is merely a jest, more or less amusing, and nothing more."

"Oh!" murmured the young girl, in despair, "the king does not, and will not, believe me?"

"No, indeed, I will not believe you," said the king. "Besides, in point of fact, what can be more natural? The king, you argue, follows me, listens to me, watches me; the king wishes perhaps to amuse himself at my expense. I will amuse myself at his; and as the king is very tender-hearted, I will take his heart by storm."

La Vallière hid her face in her hands, as she stifled her sobs.

The king continued most pitilessly; he revenged himself upon the poor victim before him for all that he had

himself suffered. "Let us invent, then, this story of my loving him and preferring him to others. The king is so simple and so conceited that he will believe me; and then we can go and tell others how credulous the king is, and can enjoy a laugh at his expense."

"Oh!" exclaimed La Vallière, "to think that, to believe that, is frightful!"

"And," pursued the king, "that is not all; if this self-conceited prince should take our jest seriously, if he should be imprudent enough to exhibit before others anything like delight at it, well, in that case, the king will be humiliated before the whole court. And what a delightful story it will be some day for him to whom I am really attached, — a part of my dowry to bring my husband, — to have the adventure to relate of the king who was so amusingly deceived by a mischievous young girl!"

"Sire!" exclaimed La Vallière, her mind bewildered, almost wandering, indeed, "not another word, I implore you; do you not see that you are killing me?"

"A jest, nothing but a jest!" murmured the king, who however began to be somewhat affected.

La Vallière fell upon her knees, and that so violently that the sound could be heard upon the hard floor. Then, clasping her hands, "Sire," she said, "I prefer shame to disloyalty."

"What do you mean?" inquired the king, without moving a step to raise the young girl from her knees.

"Sire, when I shall have sacrificed both my honor and my reason to you, you will perhaps believe in my loyalty. The tale which was related to you in Madame's apartments, and by Madame herself, is utterly false; and that which I said beneath the great oak —"

"Well!"

"That only — that was the truth."

"What!" exclaimed the king.

"Sire," exclaimed La Vallière, hurried away by the violence of her emotions, "were I to die of shame on the very spot where my knees are fixed, I would repeat it until my latest breath; I said that I loved you, and it is true: I do love you."

"You!"

"I have loved you, Sire, from the very first day I saw you; from the moment when at Blois, where I was pining away my existence, your royal looks, full of light and life, were first bent upon me. I love you still, Sire. It is a crime of high treason, I know, that a poor girl like myself should love her sovereign and should presume to tell him so. Punish me for my audacity, despise me for my shameless immodesty; but do not ever say, do not ever think, that I have jested with or deceived you. I belong to a family whose loyalty has been proved, Sire; and I love — I love my king — oh! I am dying!"

Suddenly her strength, voice, and respiration ceased, and she fell forward, like the flower Virgil mentions, which the scythe of the reaper has touched. The king, at these words, at this vehement entreaty, no longer retained either ill-will or doubt in his mind; his whole heart seemed to expand at the glowing breath of that love which proclaimed itself in such noble and courageous language. When he heard the passionate avowal of that love, therefore, his strength seemed to fail him, and he hid his face in his hands. But when he felt La Vallière's hands clinging to his own, when their warm pressure fired his blood, he bent forward, and passing his arm round La Vallière's waist, raised her from the ground and pressed her to his heart. But she, her head fallen forward on her bosom, seemed to have ceased to live. The king, terrified, called out for De Saint-Aignan.

De Saint-Aignan, who had carried his discretion so far as to remain without stirring in his corner, pretending to wipe away a tear, ran forward at the king's summons. He then assisted Louis to seat the young girl upon a couch, chafed her hands, sprinkled some Queen of Hungary water over her face, saying over and over again: "Come, Mademoiselle, it is all over; the king believes you and forgives you. There, there now! take care, or you will agitate his Majesty too much, Mademoiselle; his Majesty is so sensitive, so tender-hearted. Now, really, Mademoiselle, you must pay attention, for the king is very pale."

The fact was, the king was visibly losing color. But La Vallière did not move.

"Really, Mademoiselle," continued De Saint-Aignan, "do pray recover, I beg, I implore you; it is really time you should. Think only of one thing, that if the king should become unwell, I should be obliged to summon his physician. What a state of things that would be! So do pray rouse yourself, Mademoiselle; make an effort, quick, quick!"

It was difficult to display more persuasive eloquence than De Saint-Aignan did, but something still more powerful and of a more energetic nature than this eloquence aroused La Vallière. The king, who was kneeling before her, covered the palms of her hands with those burning kisses which are to the hands what a kiss upon the lips is to the face. La Vallière's senses returned to her; she languidly opened her eyes, and with a look of anguish murmured, "Oh, Sire, has your Majesty pardoned me, then?"

The king did not reply, for he was still too much overcome. De Saint-Aignan thought it his duty again to retire; he had observed the flame which leaped from the eyes of his Majesty. La Vallière rose.

"And now, Sire," said she, courageously, "that I have

justified myself, at least I trust so, in your Majesty's eyes, grant me leave to retire into a convent. I shall bless your Majesty all my life, and I shall die there thanking and loving Heaven for having given me one day of perfect happiness."

"No, no!" replied the king; "you will live here, on the contrary, blessing Heaven, but loving Louis, who will make your existence one of perfect felicity, — Louis, who loves you, — Louis, who swears it."

"Oh, Sire, Sire!"

And upon this doubt of La Vallière, the king's kisses became so warm that De Saint-Aignan thought it his duty to retire behind the tapestry. These kisses, however, which she had not the strength at first to resist, began to trouble the young girl.

"Oh, Sire!" she exclaimed, "do not make me repent my loyalty, for this would show me that your Majesty despises me still."

"Mademoiselle," said the king, suddenly, drawing back with an air full of respect, "there is nothing in the world that I love and honor more than yourself; and nothing in my court, I call Heaven to witness, shall be so highly regarded as you shall be henceforward. I entreat your forgiveness for my transport, Mademoiselle, — it arose from an excess of love; but I can prove to you that I shall love still more while respecting you as much as you can possibly desire." Then bending before her and taking her by the hand, he said to her, "Will you honor me by accepting the kiss I press upon your hand?" And the king's lips were pressed respectfully and lightly upon the young girl's trembling hand. "Henceforth," added Louis, rising and bending his glance upon La Vallière, — "henceforth you are under my safeguard. Do not speak to any one of the injustice I have done you; forgive others that which

they may have been able to do you. For the future you shall be so far above all those, that, far from inspiring you with fear, they shall be even beneath your pity;" and he bowed as reverently as though he were leaving a place of worship.

Then calling to De Saint-Aignan, who approached with great humility, the king said: "I hope, Count, that Mademoiselle de la Vallière will kindly confer a little of her friendship upon you, in return for that which I have vowed to her eternally."

De Saint-Aignan bent his knee before La Vallière, murmuring, "How happy, indeed, would such an honor make me!"

"I shall send your companion back to you," said the king. "Adieu, Mademoiselle, or, rather, *au revoir!* Do not forget me in your prayers, I entreat you."

"Oh, Sire!" said La Vallière, "be assured that you and Heaven are in my heart together."

These last words elated the king, who, full of happiness, hurried De Saint-Aignan down the stairs. Madame had not anticipated this *dénouement*, and neither the naiad nor the dryad had said a word about it.

CHAPTER II.

THE NEW GENERAL OF THE JESUITS.

While La Vallière and the king were mingling together, in their first confession of love, all the bitterness of the past, all the happiness of the present, and all the hopes of the future, Fouquet had retired to the apartments which had been assigned to him in the château, and was conversing with Aramis upon the subjects which the king at that moment was forgetting.

"Now tell me," began Fouquet, after having installed his guest in an arm-chair and seated himself by his side, "tell me, M. d'Herblay, what is our position with regard to the Belle-Isle affair, and whether you have received any news about it."

"Monsieur the Superintendent," replied Aramis, "everything is going on in that direction as we wish; the expenses have been paid, and nothing has transpired of our designs."

"But what about the soldiers whom the king wished to send there?"

"I received news this morning that they had arrived there a fortnight ago."

"And how have they been treated?"

"In the best manner possible."

"But what has become of the former garrison?"

"The soldiers were landed at Sarzeau, and were sent off at once towards Quimper."

"And the new men?"

"Belong to us at this very moment."

"Are you sure of what you say, my dear M. de Vannes?"

"Quite sure; and, moreover, you will see by and by how matters have turned out."

"Still, you are very well aware that of all the garrison towns Belle-Isle is the very worst."

"I know it, and have acted accordingly; no space to move about, no communications, none of the other sex, no gambling permitted. Well, it is a great pity," added Aramis, with one of those smiles so peculiar to him, "to see how much young people at the present day seek amusement, and how much, consequently, they incline towards the man who procures and pays for such amusements for them."

"But if they amuse themselves at Belle-Isle?"

"If they amuse themselves through the king's means, they will attach themselves to the king; but if they get bored to death through the king's means, and amuse themselves through M. Fouquet, they will be attached to M. Fouquet."

"And you informed my intendant, of course, so that immediately on their arrival—"

"By no means. They were left alone a whole week, to weary themselves at their ease; but at the end of the week they cried out, saying that the last officers amused themselves more than they did. Whereupon they were told that the former officers had been able to make a friend of M. Fouquet, and that M. Fouquet, knowing them to be friends of his, had from that moment done all he possibly could to prevent their getting wearied or bored upon his estates. Upon this they began to reflect. Immediately afterwards, however, the intendant added, that without anticipating M. Fouquet's orders, he knew his

master sufficiently well to be aware that he took an interest in every gentleman in the king's service, and that although he did not know the new-comers, he would do as much for them as he had done for the others."

"Excellent! and I trust that the promises were followed up; I desire, as you know, that no promise should ever be made in my name that is not fulfilled."

"Without a moment's loss of time, our two privateers and your own horses were placed at the disposal of the officers; the keys of the principal mansion were handed over to them, so that they made up hunting-parties, and excursions with such ladies as are to be found in Belle-Isle, and such others as they are enabled to enlist from the neighborhood who have no fear of seasickness."

"And there is a fair sprinkling to be met with at Sarzeau and Vannes, I believe, your Grace?"

"Yes; all along the coast," said Aramis, quietly.

"And now, for the soldiers?"

"Everything is precisely the same, in a relative degree, you understand; the soldiers have plenty of wine, excellent provisions, and good pay."

"Very good; so that —"

"So that this garrison can be depended upon, and it is a better one than the last."

"Good."

"The result is, if fortune favors us so that the garrisons are changed in this manner only every two months, that at the end of every three years the whole army will, in its turn, have been there; and therefore, instead of having one regiment in our favor, we shall have fifty thousand men."

"Yes, yes; I knew perfectly well," said Fouquet, "that no friend could be more precious and valuable than yourself, M. d'Herblay. But," he added, laughing,

"all this time we are forgetting our friend Du Vallon; what has become of him? During the three days I have spent at St. Mandé, I confess that I have forgotten him completely."

"I do not forget him, however," returned Aramis. "Porthos is at St. Mandé. All his joints are kept well greased; the greatest care is taken with regard to the food he eats and to the wines he drinks; I have made him take daily airings in the small park which you have kept for your own use, and he makes use of it accordingly. He begins to walk again; he exercises his muscular powers by bending down young elm-trees, or making the old oaks fly into splinters, as Milo of Crotona used to do; and as there are no lions in the park, it is not unlikely we shall find him alive. Our Porthos is a brave fellow."

"Yes; but in the mean time he will get wearied to death."

"He never does that."

"He will be asking questions?"

"He sees no one."

"At all events, he is looking or hoping for something or other?"

"I have inspired in him a hope which we will realize some fine morning; and he subsists on that."

"What is it?"

"That of being presented to the king."

"Oh! oh! in what character?"

"As the engineer of Belle-Isle, of course."

"Is it possible?"

"Quite true."

"Shall we not be obliged, then, to send him back to Belle-Isle?"

"Most certainly; I am even thinking of sending him back as soon as possible. Porthos is very fond of dis-

play; he is a man whose weaknesses D'Artagnan, Athos, and myself are alone acquainted with; he never commits himself in any way, — he is dignity itself. To the officers there he would seem like a Paladin of the time of the Crusades. He would make the whole staff drunk without getting so himself, and every one would regard him as an object of admiration and sympathy. If, therefore, we should happen to have any orders requiring to be carried out, Porthos is a living order; and whatever he chose to do, others would find themselves obliged to submit to."

"Send him back, then."

"That is what I intend to do; but not for a few days, for I must not omit to tell you one thing."

"What is it?"

"I begin to suspect D'Artagnan. He is not at Fontainebleau, as you may have noticed; and D'Artagnan is never absent or apparently idle without some object in view. And now that my own affairs are settled, I am going to try to ascertain what are the affairs in which D'Artagnan is engaged."

"Your own affairs are settled, you say?"

"Yes."

"You are very fortunate, in that case; and I should like to be able to say the same."

"I hope you do not make yourself uneasy."

"Hum!"

"Nothing could be better than the king's reception of you."

"True."

"And Colbert leaves you in peace."

"Almost so."

"In that case," said Aramis, with that connection of ideas which constituted his power, — "in that case, then,

we can bestow a thought upon the young girl I was speaking to you about yesterday."

"Whom do you mean?"

"What! have you forgotten already? I mean La Vallière."

"Ah! of course, of course."

"Do you object, then, to try to make a conquest of her?"

"In one respect only; my heart is engaged in another direction, and I positively do not care about the girl in the least."

"Oh!" said Aramis, "your heart is engaged, you say. The deuce! we must take care of that."

"Why?"

"Because it is terrible to have the heart occupied when others, besides yourself, have so much need of the head."

"You are right. So, you see, at your first summons I left everything. But to return to this girl. What good do you see in my troubling myself about her?"

"This: the king has taken a fancy to her; at least, so it is supposed."

"But you, who know everything, know very differently?"

"I know that the king has changed very quickly, — that the day before yesterday he was mad about Madame; that a few days ago Monsieur complained of it to the queen-mother, and that some conjugal misunderstandings and maternal scoldings were the consequence."

"How do you know all that?"

"I do know it; at all events, since these misunderstandings and scoldings the king has not addressed a word, has not paid the slightest attention, to her royal Highness."

"Well, what next?"

"Since then he has been taken up with Mademoiselle de la Vallière. Now, Mademoiselle de la Vallière is one

of Madame's maids of honor. You happen to know, I suppose, what is called a *chaperon* in matters of love. Well, then, Mademoiselle de la Vallière is Madame's *chaperon*. It is for you, therefore, to take advantage of this state of things. You have no need of that advantage. But, at all events, wounded vanity will render the conquest an easier one; the girl will get hold of the king's and Madame's secret, and you can hardly tell what a man of intelligence can do with a secret."

"But how to get at her?"

"Nay, you, of all men, to ask me such a question!" said Aramis.

"Certainly; I shall not have any time to busy myself with her."

"She is poor and unassuming, — you will create a position for her; and whether she makes the king subject to her as his mistress, or whether she only becomes his confidante, you will have gained a new disciple."

"Very good," said Fouquet. "What is to be done, then, with regard to this girl?"

"Whenever you have taken a fancy to any lady, Monsieur the Superintendent, what steps have you taken?"

"I have written to her, protesting my devotion to her. I have added, how happy I should be to render her any service in my power, and have signed 'Fouquet' at the end of the letter."

"And has any one offered any resistance?"

"One person only," replied Fouquet; "but four days ago she yielded, as the others had done."

"Will you take the trouble to write?" said Aramis, holding a pen towards Fouquet, which he took, saying:

"I will write at your dictation. My head is so taken up in another direction, that I should not be able to write two lines."

"Very well," said Aramis, "write."

And he dictated as follows: —

"I have seen you, and you will not be surprised to learn how beautiful I have found you. But for want of the position you merit at the court, your presence there is a waste of time. The devotion of a man of honor, should ambition of any kind inspire you, might possibly serve as a means of display for your talents and beauty. I place my devotion at your feet; but as devotion, however humble and discreet it may be, might possibly compromise the object of its worship, it would ill become a person of your merit to run the risk of being compromised, without her future being insured. If you would deign to accept and reply to my love, my love shall prove its gratitude to you in making you free and independent forever."

Having finished writing, Fouquet looked at Aramis.

"Sign it," said the latter.

"Is it absolutely necessary?"

"Your signature at the foot of that letter is worth a million; you forget that, my dear superintendent." Fouquet signed.

"Now, by whom will you send the letter?" asked Aramis.

"By an excellent servant of mine."

"Can you rely on him?"

"He is a man who has been with me all my life."

"Very well. Besides, in this case, we are not playing for very heavy stakes."

"How so? For if what you say be true of the accommodating disposition of this girl for the king and Madame, the king will give her all the money she can ask for."

"The king has money, then?" asked Aramis.

"I suppose so, for he has not asked me for any more."

"Oh, he will ask for some soon, never fear!"

"Nay, more than that, I had thought he would have

spoken to me about the *fête* at Vaux, but he never said a word about it."

"He will be sure to do so, though."

"You must think the king's disposition a very cruel one, M. d'Herblay."

"It is not he who is so."

"He is young, and therefore he is kind."

"He is young, and either he is weak or his passions are strong; and M. Colbert holds his weaknesses and his passions in his villanous grasp."

"You admit that you fear him?"

"I do not deny it."

"In that case I am lost."

"Why so?"

"My only influence with the king has been through the money I commanded, and now I am a ruined man."

"Not so."

"How 'not so'? Do you know my affairs better than I do?"

"That is not unlikely."

"If he were to request this *fête* to be given?"

"You will give it, of course."

"But where is the money to come from?"

"Have you ever been in want of any?"

"Oh, if you only knew at what cost I procured the last supply!"

"The next shall cost you nothing."

"But who will give it to me?"

"I will."

"What! give me six millions?"

"Ten, if necessary."

"Upon my word, my dear D'Herblay," said Fouquet, "your confidence alarms me more than the king's displeasure. Who can you possibly be, after all?"

"You know me well enough, I should think."

"Of course; but what is it you are aiming at?"

"I wish to see upon the throne of France a king devoted to M. Fouquet, and I wish M. Fouquet to be devoted to me."

"Oh!" exclaimed Fouquet, pressing his hand, "as for belonging to you, I am yours entirely; but believe me, my dear D'Herblay, you are deceiving yourself."

"In what respect?"

"The king will never become devoted to me."

"I do not remember to have said that the king would be devoted to you."

"Why, on the contrary, you have this moment said so."

"I did not say the king; I said a king."

"Is it not all the same?"

"No, on the contrary, it is quite different."

"I do not understand you."

"You will shortly, then. Suppose, for instance, the king in question were to be a very different person from Louis XIV."

"Another person?"

"Yes, who is indebted for everything to you."

"Impossible!"

"His very throne even."

"Oh, you are mad! There is no other man but Louis XIV. who can sit on the throne of France. I see none, not one."

"But I see one."

"Unless it be Monsieur," said Fouquet, looking at Aramis uneasily. "Yet Monsieur—"

"It is not Monsieur."

"But how can it be that a prince not of the royal line, that a prince without any right—"

"My king, or rather your king, will be everything that is necessary, be assured of that."

"Be careful, M. d'Herblay; you make my blood run cold, and my head swim."

Aramis smiled. "There is but little occasion for that," he replied.

"Again, I repeat, you terrify me!" said Fouquet.

Aramis smiled.

"You laugh," said Fouquet.

"The day will come when you will laugh too; only, at the present moment I must laugh alone."

"But explain yourself."

"When the proper day shall have arrived, I will explain all; fear nothing. You are no more Saint Peter than I am the Saviour; and yet I say to you, 'O man of little faith, wherefore dost thou doubt?'"

"Eh, *mon Dieu!* I cannot but doubt, because I do not see."

"That is because you are blind. I will no longer treat you like Saint Peter, but like Saint Paul, and I will say unto you, 'A day will come when thine eyes shall be opened.'"

"Oh," said Fouquet, "how willingly would I believe!"

"You do not believe! — you who through my means have ten times crossed the abyss yawning at your feet, and in which, had you been alone, you would have been swallowed up! You do not believe! — you who from attorney-general attained the rank of intendant, from the rank of intendant that of first minister of the crown, and who from the rank of first minister will pass to that of mayor of the palace! But, no," he said, with the same unaltered smile, "no, no, you cannot see, and consequently cannot believe that;" and Aramis rose to withdraw.

"One word more," said Fouquet. "You have never

yet spoken to me in this manner; you have never yet shown yourself so confident — I should rather say so daring."

"Because it is necessary, in order to speak confidently, to have the lips unfettered."

"And that is now your case?"

"Yes."

"Since a very short time, then?"

"Since yesterday only."

"Oh, M. d'Herblay, take care! Your confidence is becoming audacity."

"One can well be audacious when one is powerful."

"And you are powerful?"

"I have offered you ten millions; I offer them again to you."

Fouquet rose, much agitated and disturbed. "Come, come," he said; "you spoke of overthrowing kings and replacing them by others. God forgive me! but if I am not really out of my senses, is or is not that what you said just now?"

"You are not out of your senses, for it is perfectly true that I did say that just now."

"And why did you say so?"

"Because one may speak in this manner of thrones being cast down and kings being raised up, when one is one's self far above all kings and thrones, of this world at least."

"Your power is infinite, then?" cried Fouquet.

"I have told you so already, and I repeat it," replied Aramis, with glistening eyes and trembling lips.

Fouquet threw himself back in his chair, and buried his face in his hands. Aramis looked at him for a moment, as the angel of human destinies might have looked upon a simple mortal.

"Adieu!" he said to him; "sleep undisturbed, and send your letter to La Vallière. To-morrow we shall see each other again."

"Yes, to-morrow," said Fouquet, shaking his head like a man returning to his senses. "But where shall we see each other?"

"At the king's promenade, if you like."

"Very well;" and they separated.

CHAPTER III.

THE STORM.

The dawn of the following day was dark and gloomy; and as every one knew that a ride was set down in the royal programme, every one's gaze, as his eyes opened, was directed towards the sky. Just above the tops of the trees a thick, suffocating vapor seemed to remain suspended, with hardly sufficient power to rise thirty feet above the ground under the influence of the sun's rays, which could barely be seen through the veil of a heavy and thick mist. That morning there was no dew; the turf was dried up for want of moisture, and the flowers were withered. The birds sang less cheerfully than usual amid the boughs, which remained as motionless as death. The strange, confused, and animated murmurs, which seemed born of the sun, and to exist by it, — that respiration of Nature which is unceasingly heard amid all other sounds, — could not be heard now; never had silence been so profound.

The king had noticed the cheerless aspect of the heavens as he approached the window immediately after rising. But as all the directions had been given respecting the drive, and every preparation had been made accordingly, and, what was far more imperious than everything else, as Louis relied upon this excursion to satisfy the cravings of his imagination, and we will even already say the clamorous desires of his heart, — the king unhesitatingly decided that the appearance of the heavens had nothing whatever to do with the matter, and that the excursion having been

appointed, should take place, whatever the state of the weather might be. Besides, there are in certain terrestrial realms privileged by Heaven times when it might almost be supposed that the expressed wish of an earthly monarch has its influence over the Divine will. It was Virgil who observed of Augustus, *Nocte placet tota redeunt spectacula mane.* Louis XIV. had Boileau, who ought to have told him something very different; and the Lord ought to have been as compliant to him as Jove was to Augustus. Louis attended Mass as usual, but it must be confessed that his attention was somewhat distracted from the presence of the Creator by the remembrance of the creature. His mind was occupied during the service in reckoning more than once the number of minutes, then of seconds, which separated him from the blissful moment when the departure would take place, — that is to say, the moment when Madame would set out with her maids of honor. As a matter of course, everybody at the château was ignorant of the interview which had taken place the evening before between La Vallière and the king. Montalais, perhaps, with her usual chattering propensity, might have been disposed to spread it abroad; but Montalais on this occasion was held in check by Malicorne, who had placed upon her lips the padlock of mutual interest.

As for Louis XIV., his happiness was so extreme that he had nearly or quite forgiven Madame her little piece of ill-nature of the previous evening. In fact, he had occasion to congratulate himself about it rather than to complain of it. Had it not been for her ill-natured action, he would not have received the letter from La Vallière; had it not been for the letter, he would have had no interview; and had it not been for the interview, he would have remained undecided. His heart was filled with too much happiness for any ill-feeling to remain in it, at that mo-

ment at least. Instead, therefore, of knitting his brows into a frown when he perceived his sister-in-law, Louis resolved to receive her in a still more friendly and gracious manner than usual. But that would be on one condition only, — that she would be ready to set out early.

Such was the nature of Louis's thoughts during Mass, — thoughts which made him during the holy service, it must be said, forget matters which in his character of Most Christian King and eldest son of the Church ought to have occupied his attention. Yet God is so kind towards youthful errors, — all which regards love, even blameworthy love, so easily finds forgiveness in his Fatherly eyes, — that on going out from Mass, Louis, raising his eyes to the heavens, could see through the rents in a cloud a strip of the azure carpet which is pressed by the foot of the Almighty. He returned to the château; and as the departure was fixed for midday only, and it was at present just ten o'clock, he set to work most desperately with Colbert and Lyonne. But even while he worked, Louis went from the table to the window which looked out upon Madame's pavilion; he saw M. Fouquet in the courtyard, to whom the courtiers, since the favor shown him on the previous evening, paid greater attention than ever, and who himself was coming with an affable and extremely cheerful air to present his respects to the king.

The king, instinctively, on noticing Fouquet, turned towards Colbert, who was smiling, and seemed full of benevolence and delight, — a state of feeling which had arisen from the very moment one of his secretaries had entered and handed him a pocket-book, which he had put unopened into his pocket. But as there was always something sinister at the bottom of any delight expressed by Colbert, Louis preferred, of the smiles of the two men,

those of Fouquet. He beckoned to the superintendent to come up, and then turning towards Lyonne and Colbert, he said: "Finish this matter, place it on my desk, and I will read it at my leisure;" and he left the room.

At the sign the king had made to him, Fouquet had hastened up the staircase, while Aramis, who was with the superintendent, had quietly retired among the group of undistinguished courtiers, and disappeared without having been even observed by the king. The king and Fouquet met at the top of the staircase.

"Sire," said Fouquet, remarking the gracious manner in which Louis was about to receive him, "your Majesty has overwhelmed me with kindness during the last few days. It is not a youthful monarch, but a young god, who reigns over France, — the god of pleasure, happiness, and love."

The king colored. The compliment, although flattering, was not the less somewhat direct. Louis conducted Fouquet to a small room which separated his study from his sleeping apartment.

"Do you know why I summoned you?" said the king, as he seated himself upon the edge of the casement, so as not to lose anything that might be passing in the gardens which fronted the opposite entrance to Madame's pavilion.

"No, Sire; but I am sure it was for something agreeable, if I am to judge from your Majesty's gracious smile."

"Ah, you prejudge!"

"No, Sire; I look and I see."

"You are mistaken, then."

"I, Sire?"

"For I summoned you, on the contrary, to pick a quarrel with you."

"With me, Sire?"

"Yes, and that a serious one."

"Really, your Majesty alarms me; and yet I wait most confident in your justice and goodness."

"Do you know, I am told, M. Fouquet, that you are preparing a grand *fête* at Vaux."

Fouquet smiled, as a sick man would at the first shiver of a fever which has left him but returns again.

"And that you have not invited me!" continued the king.

"Sire," replied Fouquet, "I have not even thought of the *fête* you speak of, and it was only yesterday evening that one of my *friends* [Fouquet laid stress upon the word] was kind enough to make me think of it."

"Yet I saw you yesterday evening, M. Fouquet, and you said nothing to me about it."

"Sire, how dared I hope that your Majesty would so greatly descend from your own exalted station as to honor my dwelling with your royal presence?"

"Excuse me, M. Fouquet, you did not speak to me about your *fête*."

"I did not allude to the *fête* before your Majesty, I repeat, in the first place, because nothing had been decided with regard to it, and, secondly, because I feared a refusal."

"And something made you fear a refusal, M. Fouquet? You see I am determined to push you hard."

"Sire, the profound wish I had that your Majesty should accept my invitation — "

"Well, M. Fouquet, nothing is easier, I perceive, than our coming to an understanding. Your wish is to invite me to your *fête*, — my own is to be present at it; invite me, and I will go."

"Is it possible that your Majesty will deign to accept?" murmured the superintendent.

"Why, really, Monsieur," said the king, laughing, "I think I do more than accept, — I think I invite myself."

"Your Majesty overwhelms me with honor and delight!" exclaimed Fouquet; "but I shall be obliged to repeat what M. de la Vieuville said to your ancestor Henry IV., *Domine, non sum dignus.*"

"To which I reply, M. Fouquet, that if you give a *fête*, I will go, whether I am invited or not."

"I thank your Majesty deeply," said Fouquet, as he raised his head beneath this favor, which he was convinced would be his ruin. But how could your Majesty have been informed of it?"

"By public rumor, M. Fouquet, which says such wonderful things of yourself and of the marvels of your house. Would you become proud, M. Fouquet, if the king were to be jealous of you?"

"I should be the happiest man in the world, Sire, since the very day on which your Majesty were to become jealous of Vaux, I should possess something worthy of being offered to you."

"Very well, M. Fouquet, prepare your *fête*, and open the doors of your house as widely as possible."

"It is for your Majesty to fix the day," said Fouquet.

"This day month, then."

"Has your Majesty any further commands?"

"Nothing, Monsieur the Superintendent, except from the present moment until then to have you near me as much as possible."

"I have the honor to form one of your Majesty's party for the ride."

"Very good. I am just now starting, M. Fouquet; for there are the ladies, I see, who are going to the appointed place."

With this remark, the king, with all the eagerness, not only of a young man, but of a young man in love, withdrew from the window, in order to take his gloves and

cane, which his valet held ready for him. The neighing of the horses and the rumbling of the wheels on the gravel of the courtyard were heard. The king descended the stairs; and at the moment he made his appearance upon the flight of steps, every one stopped. The king walked straight up to the young queen. The queen-mother, who was still suffering more than ever from the illness with which she was afflicted, did not wish to go out. Maria Theresa accompanied Madame in her carriage, and asked the king in what direction he wished to ride. The king, who had just seen La Vallière, still pale from the events of the previous evening, get into a carriage with three of her companions, told the queen that he had no preference, and wherever she would wish to go, he would accompany her. The queen then desired that the outriders should proceed in the direction of Apremont.

The outriders set off, accordingly, before the others. The king rode on horseback, and for a few minutes accompanied the carriage of the queen and Madame, with his hand resting upon the door. The weather had cleared up a little; but a kind of veil of dust, like a thick gauze, was still spread over the surface of the heavens, and the sun made every glittering atom of dust glisten again within the circuit of its rays. The heat was stifling; but as the king did not seem to pay any attention to the state of the weather, no one made himself uneasy about it, and the party, in obedience to the orders which had been given by the queen, took its course in the direction of Apremont.

The courtiers present were full of spirits; it was evident that every one tried to forget, and to make others forget, the bitter discussions of the previous evening. Madame, particularly, was delightful; in fact, seeing the king at the door of her carriage, as she did not suppose he would be there for the queen's sake, she hoped that

her prince had returned to remain with her. Hardly, however, had they proceeded a quarter of a mile on the road, when the king with a gracious smile saluted them and drew up his horse, leaving the queen's carriage to pass on, then that of the principal ladies of honor, and then all the others in succession, who, seeing the king stop, wished in their turn to stop too; but the king made a sign to them to continue their progress. When La Vallière's carriage passed, the king approached it, saluted the ladies, and was preparing to accompany the carriage of the maids of honor in the same way he had attended Madame's, when suddenly the whole file of carriages stopped. It appeared that the queen, uneasy because the king had left her, had just given orders for the performance of this manœuvre, the direction in which the promenade was to take place having been left to her. The king, having sent to inquire what her object was in stopping the carriages, was informed in reply that she wished to walk. She very probably hoped that the king, who was attending the carriage of the maids of honor on horseback, would not venture to attend the maids of honor themselves on foot.

They had arrived in the middle of the forest. The promenade, in fact, was not ill-timed, especially for those who were dreamers or lovers. From the little open space where the halt had just been made, three beautiful long walks, shady and undulating, stretched out before them. These walks were green with moss and arched over by foliage; and each one had its horizon, consisting of about a handbreadth of sky, seen through the interlacing of the branches of the trees. At the end of the walks the startled deer were seen hurrying to and fro, with manifest signs of uneasiness; first stopping for a moment in the middle of the path, and raising their heads, they fled with the speed of an arrow, or bounded into the depths of the

forest, where they disappeared from view. Now and then a rabbit, of philosophical mien, could be noticed quietly sitting upright, rubbing his muzzle with his fore-paws, and looking about inquiringly, as though wondering whether all these people who were approaching in his direction, and who had just disturbed him in his meditations and his meal, were not followed by some crooked-legged dog, or whether some one of them had not a gun under his arm.

All alighted from their carriages as soon as they observed that the queen was doing so. Maria Theresa took the arm of one of her ladies of honor, and with a side-glance towards the king, who did not perceive that he was in the slightest degree the object of the queen's attention, entered the forest by the first path before her. Two of the outriders preceded her Majesty with long poles, which they used for the purpose of putting the branches of the trees aside, or removing the brambles which might impede her progress.

As soon as Madame alighted, she found the Comte de Guiche at her side, who bowed and placed himself at her disposal. Monsieur, delighted with his bath two days before, had announced his preference for the river, and, having given De Guiche leave of absence, had remained at the château with the Chevalier de Lorraine and Manicamp. He was not in the slightest degree jealous. He had been looked for to no purpose in the procession; but as Monsieur was a man who thought a great deal of himself, and usually contributed very little to the general pleasure, his absence had been a subject of satisfaction rather than of regret.

Every one had followed the example which the queen and Madame had set, doing just as they pleased, according as chance or fancy influenced them. The king, we have already observed, remained near La Vallière, and throw-

ing himself off his horse at the moment the door of her carriage was opened, offered her his hand to alight. Montalais and Tonnay-Charente immediately drew back and kept at a distance, — the former from calculated, the latter from prudent, motives. There was this difference, however, between the two, that the one had withdrawn from a wish to please the king, the other from the wish to displease him.

During the last half-hour the weather also had undergone a change. The clouds which had been spread over the sky, as if driven by a blast of heated air, had become massed together in the west; and afterwards, as if resisted by a contrary wind, were now advancing slowly and heavily towards them. The approach of the storm could be felt; but as the king did not perceive it, no one thought it was right to do so. The promenade was therefore continued. Some of the company, with minds ill at ease on the subject, raised their eyes from time to time towards the sky; others, even more timid, walked about without wandering too far from the carriages, where they expected to take shelter in case the storm burst. The greater part of the procession, however, observing that the king fearlessly entered the wood with La Vallière, followed his Majesty. The king, noticing this, took La Vallière's hand, and led her away by a side-path, where no one ventured to follow him.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SHOWER OF RAIN.

At this moment, and in the same direction in which the king and La Vallière were proceeding, except that they were in the wood itself instead of following the path, two men were walking together, utterly indifferent to the appearance of the heavens. Their heads were bent down in the manner of people occupied with matters of great moment. They had not observed either De Guiche and Madame, or the king and La Vallière. Suddenly something passed through the air like a stream of fire, followed by a loud but distant rumbling noise.

"Ah!" said one of them, raising his head, "here is the storm. Let us regain our carriages, my dear D'Herblay."

Aramis looked inquiringly at the heavens. "There is no occasion to hurry yet," he said; and then, resuming the conversation where it had doubtless been interrupted, he said, "You were observing that the letter we wrote last evening must by this time have reached its destination?"

"I was saying that she certainly has it."

"By whom did you send it?"

"By my old servant, as I have already told you."

"Did he bring back an answer?"

"I have not seen him since. The young girl was probably in attendance on Madame, or was in her own room dressing, and he may have had to wait. Our time for leaving arrived; and we set off of course. I cannot, therefore, know what is going on yonder."

"Did you see the king before leaving?"

"Yes."

"How did he seem?"

"Nothing could be better or worse, according as he be sincere or hypocritical."

"And the *fête*?"

"Will take place in a month."

"He invited himself, you say?"

"With a pertinacity in which I detected Colbert's influence. But has not last night quite removed your illusions?"

"With respect to what?"

"With respect to the assistance you may be able to give me in this matter."

"No; I have passed the night writing, and all my orders are given."

"Do not conceal from yourself, D'Herblay, that the *fête* will cost several millions."

"I will give six; do you on your side get two or three, at all events."

"You are a wonderful man, my dear D'Herblay."

Aramis smiled.

"But," inquired Fouquet, with some remaining uneasiness, "how is it that while now you are squandering millions in this manner, a few days ago you did not pay the fifty thousand livres to Baisemeaux out of your own pocket?"

"Because a few days ago I was as poor as Job."

"And to-day?"

"To-day I am wealthier than the king himself."

"Very well," said Fouquet; "I understand men pretty well, — I know you are incapable of falsehood; I do not wish to wrest your secret from you, and so let us talk no more about it."

At this moment a dull, heavy rumbling was heard, which suddenly burst forth in a violent clap of thunder.

"Oh!" said Fouquet, "I was quite right in what I said."

"Come," said Aramis, "let us rejoin the carriages."

"We shall not have time," said Fouquet, "for here comes the rain."

In fact, as if the heavens were opened, a shower of large drops of rain was suddenly heard falling on the trees about them.

"Oh!" said Aramis, "we shall have time to reach the carriages before the foliage becomes saturated."

"It will be better," said Fouquet, "to take shelter somewhere, — in a grotto, for instance."

"Yes, but where are we to find a grotto?" inquired Aramis.

"I know one," said Fouquet, smiling, "not ten paces from here." Then looking round about him, he added, "Yes, we are quite right."

"You are very fortunate to have so good a memory," said Aramis, smiling in his turn; "but are you not afraid that your coachman, finding we do not return, will suppose that we have taken another road back, and that he will follow the carriages belonging to the court?"

"Oh, there is no fear of that!" said Fouquet. "Whenever I place my coachman and my carriage in any particular spot, nothing but an express order from the king could stir them. But it seems that we are not the only ones who have come so far, for I hear footsteps and the sound of voices."

As he spoke, Fouquet turned, and opened with his cane a mass of foliage which hid the path from his view. Aramis's glance as well as his own was directed at the same moment through the opening he had made.

"A woman!" said Aramis.

"A man!" said Fouquet.

"La Vallière!"

"The king!"

"Oh!" said Aramis, "is the king aware of your cavern as well? I should not be astonished if he were, for he seems to be on very good terms with the nymphs of Fontainebleau."

"Never mind," said Fouquet; "let us get there. If he is not aware of it, we shall see what he will do; if he should know it, as it has two openings, while he enters by one we can leave by the other."

"Is it far?" asked Aramis; "for the rain is beginning to penetrate."

"We are there now," said Fouquet, as he put aside a few branches, and an excavation of the rock could be observed, which had been entirely concealed by heaths, ivy, and a thick covert of small shrubs.

Fouquet led the way, followed by Aramis; but as the latter entered the grotto, he turned round, saying, "Yes, they are entering the wood; and see! they are bending their steps this way."

"Very well; let us make room for them," said Fouquet, smiling and pulling Aramis by his cloak. "But I do not think the king knows of my grotto."

"True," said Aramis; "they are looking about them, but it is only for a tree of denser foliage."

Aramis was not mistaken. The king's looks were directed upwards, and not around him. He held La Vallière's arm within his own, and her hand in his. La Vallière's feet began to slip on the damp grass. Louis again looked round him with greater attention than before, and perceiving an enormous oak with a thick growth of foliage hurriedly drew La Vallière beneath its protecting shelter. The poor girl looked round her on all

sides, and seemed half afraid, half desirous, of being followed. The king made her lean her back against the trunk of the tree, whose vast circumference, protected by the thickness of the foliage, was as dry as if at that moment the rain had not been falling in torrents. He himself remained standing before her with his head uncovered. After a few minutes some drops of rain penetrated through the branches of the tree and fell on the king's forehead, but he was not even aware of it.

"Oh, Sire!" murmured La Vallière, pushing the king's hat towards him. But the king simply bowed, and determinedly refused to cover his head.

"Now or never is the time to offer your place," said Fouquet in Aramis's ear.

"Now or never is the time to listen, and not lose a syllable of what they may have to say to each other," replied Aramis in Fouquet's ear.

In fact they both remained perfectly silent, and the king's voice reached them where they were.

"Believe me, Mademoiselle," said the king, "I perceive, or rather I can imagine, your uneasiness; believe how sincerely I regret to have separated you from the rest of the company, to bring you to a place where you will suffer from the rain. You are wet already, and perhaps are cold too?"

"No, Sire."

"And yet you tremble?"

"I am afraid, Sire, that my absence may be misinterpreted at the moment when all the others are certainly reassembled."

"I would be glad to propose returning to the carriages, Mademoiselle, but pray look and listen, and tell me if it be possible to attempt to make the slightest progress at the present moment?"

In fact, the thunder was still rolling, and the rain continued to fall in torrents.

"Besides," continued the king, "no possible interpretation can be made which would be to your discredit. Are you not with the King of France, — in other words, with the first gentleman of the kingdom."

"Certainly, Sire," replied La Vallière, "and it is a very distinguished honor for me; it is not, therefore, for myself that I fear the interpretations that may be made."

"For whom, then?"

"For yourself, Sire."

"For me, Mademoiselle?" said the king, smiling; "I do not understand you."

"Has your Majesty already forgotten what took place yesterday evening in her royal Highness's apartments?"

"Oh! forget that, I beg, or allow me to remember it for no other purpose than to thank you once more for your letter, and —"

"Sire," interrupted La Vallière, "the rain is falling, and your Majesty's head is uncovered."

"I entreat you not to think of anything but yourself, Mademoiselle."

"Oh!" said La Vallière, smiling, "I am a country girl, accustomed to roaming through the meadows of the Loire and the gardens of Blois, whatever the weather may be. And as for my clothes," she added, looking at her simple muslin dress, "your Majesty sees they are not much to risk."

"Indeed, Mademoiselle, I have already noticed more than once that you owed nearly everything to yourself and nothing to your toilet. You are not a coquette, and that is one of your greatest charms in my eyes."

"Sire, do not make me out better than I am, and say merely, 'You cannot be a coquette.'"

"Why so?"

"Because," said La Vallière, smiling, "I am not rich."

"You admit, then," said the king, quickly, "that you have a love for beautiful things."

"Sire, I regard only those things as beautiful which are within my reach. Everything which is too highly placed for me —"

"You are indifferent to?"

"Is foreign to me, as being prohibited."

"And I, Mademoiselle," said the king, "do not find that you are at my court on the footing you should be. The services of your family have not been sufficiently brought under my notice. The advancement of your family has been cruelly neglected by my uncle."

"Oh, not at all, Sire! His royal Highness Monseigneur le Duc d'Orléans has always been exceedingly kind to M. de Saint-Remy, my step-father. The services rendered were humble, and, properly speaking, our services have been adequately recognized. It is not every one who is happy enough to find opportunities of serving his sovereign with distinction. I have no doubt at all that if ever opportunities had been met with, my family's deeds would have been equal to their loyalty; but that happiness has never been ours."

"In that case, Mademoiselle, it belongs to kings to repair the want of opportunity; and most delightedly do I undertake to repair, in your instance, and with the least possible delay, the wrongs of fortune towards you."

"Nay, Sire," cried La Vallière, eagerly; "leave things, I beg, as they now are."

"What, Mademoiselle! you refuse what I ought and what I wish to do for you!"

"All I desired has been granted me, Sire, when the

honor was conferred upon me of forming one of Madame's household."

"But if you refuse for yourself, at least accept for your family."

"Your generous intention, Sire, bewilders and makes me apprehensive; for in doing for my family what your kindness urges you to do, your Majesty will raise up enemies for us, and enemies for yourself too. Leave me in my humble condition, Sire; leave to all the emotions I may experience the happy refinement of disinterestedness."

"The sentiments you express," said the king, "are indeed admirable."

"Quite true," murmured Aramis in Fouquet's ear, "and he cannot be accustomed to them."

"But," replied Fouquet, "suppose she were to make a similar reply to my letter."

"True!" said Aramis; "let us not anticipate, but wait the conclusion."

"And then, dear M. d'Herblay," added the superintendent, hardly able to appreciate the sentiments which La Vallière had just expressed, "it is very often a sound calculation to seem disinterested with monarchs."

"Exactly what I was thinking this very minute," said Aramis. "Let us listen."

The king approached nearer to La Vallière; and as the rain dripped more and more through the foliage of the oak, he held his hat over the head of the young girl, who raised her beautiful blue eyes towards the royal hat which sheltered her, and shook her head, sighing deeply as she did so.

"What melancholy thought," said the king, "can possibly reach your heart when I place mine as a rampart before it?"

"I will tell you, Sire. I had already once before

broached this question, which is so difficult for a young girl of my age to discuss, but your Majesty imposed silence on me. Your Majesty belongs not to yourself alone, you are married; and every sentiment which would separate your Majesty from the queen, in leading your Majesty to take notice of me, will be a source of the profoundest sorrow for the queen." The king endeavored to interrupt the young girl, but she continued with a suppliant gesture: "The queen loves your Majesty with an attachment which can be well understood, and follows with her eyes every step of your Majesty which separates you from her. Happy enough in having had her fate united to your own, she weepingly implores Heaven to preserve you to her, and is jealous of the faintest throb of your heart bestowed elsewhere." The king again seemed anxious to speak, but again did La Vallière venture to prevent him. "Would it not, therefore, be a most blamable action," she continued, "if your Majesty, a witness of this anxious and disinterested affection, gave the queen any cause for jealousy? Oh, forgive me, Sire, for the expression I have used! I well know it is impossible, or rather that it would be impossible, that the greatest queen of the whole world could be jealous of a poor girl like myself. But though a queen, she is still a woman; and her heart, like that of any of her sex, cannot close itself against the suspicions which such as are evilly disposed insinuate. For heaven's sake, Sire, think no more of me! I am unworthy of your regard."

"Oh, Mademoiselle," exclaimed the king, "do you not know that in speaking as you have done, you change my esteem for you into admiration?"

"Sire, you take my words for more than they are; you suppose me to be better than I really am, and attach a greater merit to me than God has ever given me. Spare me, Sire; for did I not know your Majesty to be the

most generous man in your kingdom, I should believe your Majesty were jesting."

"You do not, I know, fear such a thing; I am quite sure of that," exclaimed Louis.

"Sire, I shall be obliged to believe it, if your Majesty continues to hold such language towards me."

"I am a most unhappy prince, then," said the king, in a tone of regret which was not assumed, — "the unhappiest prince in all Christendom, since I am powerless to induce belief in my words in one whom I love the best in the wide world, and who almost breaks my heart by refusing to credit my regard for her."

"Oh, Sire!" said La Vallière, gently putting the king aside, who had approached nearer and nearer to her, "I think the storm has passed away now, and the rain has ceased."

At the very moment, however, that the poor girl, fleeing as it were from her own heart, which doubtless throbbed too much in unison with the king's, uttered these words, the storm undertook to contradict her. A bluish flash of lightning illumined the forest with a weird glare, and a peal of thunder, like a discharge of artillery, burst over their very heads, as if the height of the oak which sheltered them had attracted the thunderbolt. The young girl could not repress a cry of terror. The king with one hand drew her towards his heart, and stretched the other above her head, as though to shield her from the lightning. A moment's silence ensued, as the group, delightful as everything young and loving is delightful, remained motionless, while Fouquet and Aramis contemplated it in attitudes as motionless as were those of La Vallière and the king.

"Oh, Sire, Sire!" murmured La Vallière, "do you hear?" and her head fell upon his shoulder.

"Yes," said the king. "You see, the storm has not passed away."

"It is a warning, Sire." The king smiled. "Sire, it is the voice of heaven in anger."

"Be it so," said the king. "I agree to accept that peal of thunder as a warning, and even as a menace, if in five minutes from the present moment it is repeated with equal violence; but if not, permit me to think that the storm is a storm simply, and nothing more;" and the king at the same moment raised his head, as if to interrogate the heavens. But as if the heavens had been in agreement with Louis, during the five minutes' silence which elapsed after the burst of thunder which had alarmed the two lovers no renewed peal was heard; and when the thunder was again heard, it was plainly passing away, as if during those same five minutes the storm, put to flight, had traversed the heavens with the speed of the wings of the wind. "Well, Louise," said the king, in a low tone of voice, "will you still threaten me with the anger of heaven? You regarded the thunder as a warning; do you still believe it to be, in the least degree, an omen of misfortune?"

The young girl looked up, and saw that by this time the rain had penetrated the foliage above them, and was trickling down the king's face. "Oh, Sire, Sire!" she exclaimed, in accents of eager apprehension, which greatly agitated the king. "Is it for me," she murmured, "that the king remains thus uncovered, and exposed to the rain? What am I, then?"

"You are, you perceive," said the king, "the divinity who dissipates the storm, the goddess who brings back the sun."

In fact, a ray of sunlight streamed through the forest, and caused the rain-drops which dripped from the leaves

or fell vertically through the openings in the branches of the trees to glisten like diamonds.

"Sire," said La Vallière, almost overcome, but making a powerful effort over herself, — "Sire, once again think of the trouble your Majesty will have to submit to on my account. At this very moment they are seeking you in every direction. The queen must be full of uneasiness; and Madame — oh, Madame!" the young girl exclaimed, with an expression which almost resembled terror.

This name had a certain effect upon the king. He started, and disengaged himself from La Vallière, whom he had till that moment held in his embrace. He then advanced towards the path, in order to look round, and returned somewhat thoughtfully to La Vallière. "Madame, did you say?" he remarked.

"Yes, Madame; she too is jealous," said La Vallière, with a marked accent; and her eyes, so timorous in their expression and so modestly fugitive in their glance, for a moment ventured to question the eyes of the king.

"Still," returned Louis, making an effort over himself, "it seems to me that Madame has no reason, no right, to be jealous of me."

"Alas!" murmured La Vallière.

"Oh, Mademoiselle," said the king, almost in a tone of reproach, "are you among those who think that the sister has a right to be jealous of the brother?"

"It is not for me, Sire, to penetrate your Majesty's secrets."

"You do believe it, then, like the others?" exclaimed the king.

"I do believe Madame is jealous, Sire," La Vallière replied firmly.

"Is it possible," said the king, with some anxiety, "that you have perceived it, then, from her conduct to-

wards you? Have her manners in any way been such towards you that you can attribute them to the jealousy you speak of?"

"Not at all, Sire; I am of so little importance."

"Oh, if it were really the case —" exclaimed Louis, violently.

"Sire," interrupted the young girl, "it has ceased raining; some one is coming, I think;" and forgetful of all etiquette, she seized the king by the arm.

"Well," replied the king, "let them come. Who is there who would venture to think I had done wrong in remaining alone with Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"For pity's sake, Sire! they will think it strange to see you wet through in this manner, and that you should have run such risk for me."

"I have simply done my duty as a gentleman," said Louis; "and woe to him who may fail in his, in criticising his sovereign's conduct!"

In fact, at this moment a few eager and curious persons were seen in the walk, as if engaged in a search, who, observing the king and La Vallière, seemed to have found what they were seeking. They were some of the courtiers who had been sent by the queen and Madame, and who immediately uncovered themselves, in token of having perceived his Majesty. But Louis, notwithstanding La Vallière's confusion, did not quit his respectful and tender attitude. Then, when all the courtiers were assembled in the walk, — when every one had been able to perceive the mark of deference with which he had treated the young girl, by remaining standing and bareheaded before her during the storm, — he offered her his arm, led her towards the group who were waiting, recognized by an inclination of the head the respectful salutations which were paid him on all sides, and

still holding his hat in his hand, conducted her to her carriage. And as the rain still continued to fall, — a last adieu of the departing storm, — the other ladies, whom respect had prevented from getting into their carriages before the king, remained, altogether unprotected by hood and cloak, exposed to the rain from which the king, with his hat over her, was protecting, as much as he was able, the humblest among them.

The queen and Madame, like the others, witnessed this exaggerated courtesy of the king. Madame was so disconcerted at it that she touched the queen with her elbow, saying, "Look there! look there!"

The queen closed her eyes, as if she had been suddenly seized with a fainting attack. She lifted her hand to her face and entered her carriage, Madame following her. The king again mounted his horse, and without showing a preference for any particular carriage-door, returned to Fontainebleau, absorbed in thought, the reins hanging on his horse's neck.

As soon as the crowd had disappeared, and the sound of the horses and carriages grew fainter in the distance, and when they were certain that no one could see them, Aramis and Fouquet came out of their grotto, and both of them in silence passed into the walk. Aramis looked most narrowly not only at the whole extent of the open space stretching out before and behind him, but even into the very depths of the wood.

"M. Fouquet," he said, when he had quite satisfied himself that they were alone, "we must get back, at any cost, the letter you wrote to La Vallière."

"That will be easy enough," said Fouquet, "if my servant has not given it to her."

"In any case it must be done; do you understand?"

"Yes; the king is in love with this girl, you mean?"

"Exceedingly so; and what is worse is that on her side the girl is passionately attached to the king."

"As much as to say that we must change our tactics, I suppose?"

"Not a doubt of it; you have no time to lose. You must see La Vallière, and without thinking any more of becoming her lover, which is out of the question, you must declare yourself her dearest friend and her most humble servant."

"I will do so," replied Fouquet, "and without the slightest feeling of disinclination, for she seems a good-hearted girl."

"Or a clever one," said Aramis; "but in that case the greater reason." Then he added, after a moment's pause, "If I am not mistaken, that girl will become the strongest passion of the king. Let us return to our carriage, and as fast as possible to the château."

CHAPTER V.

TOBY.

Two hours after the superintendent's carriage had set off by Aramis's directions, conveying them both towards Fontainebleau with the fleetness of the clouds which the last breath of the tempest was hurrying across the face of the heavens, La Vallière was closeted in her own apartment, dressed in a simple muslin wrapper, having just finished a slight repast, which was served upon a small marble table. Suddenly the door was opened, and a servant entered to announce M. Fouquet, who had called to request permission to pay his respects to her. She made him repeat the message twice over; for the poor girl only knew M. Fouquet by name, and could not conceive what she could possibly have to do with a superintendent of finances. However, as he might possibly come from the king, — and after the conversation we have recorded, it was very likely, — she glanced at her mirror, drew out still more the long ringlets of her hair, and desired him to be admitted. La Vallière could not, however, refrain from a certain feeling of uneasiness. A visit from the superintendent was not an ordinary event in the life of any woman attached to the court. Fouquet, so notorious for his generosity, his gallantry, and his sensitive delicacy of feeling with regard to women generally, had received more invitations than he had requested audiences. In many houses the presence of the superintendent had been significant of fortune; in many hearts, of love.

Fouquet entered the apartment with a manner full of respect, presenting himself with that ease and gracefulness of manner which was the distinctive characteristic of the men of eminence of that period, and which at the present day seems no longer to be understood, even in the portraits of the period in which the painter has endeavored to recall them into being. La Vallière acknowledged Fouquet's ceremonious salutation with a timid girl's courtesy, and motioned him to a seat. But Fouquet, with a bow, said, "I will not sit down, Mademoiselle, until you have pardoned me."

"I?" asked La Vallière; "pardoned what?"

Fouquet fixed a most piercing look upon the young girl, and fancied he could perceive in her face nothing but the most unaffected surprise. "I observe, Mademoiselle," he said, "that you have as much generosity as intelligence, and I read in your eyes the forgiveness I solicit. A pardon pronounced by your lips is insufficient for me, and I need the forgiveness of your heart and mind."

"Upon my honor, Monsieur," said La Vallière, "I assure you that I do not understand you."

"Again, that is a delicacy on your part which charms me," replied Fouquet, "and I see you do not wish me to blush before you."

"Blush, blush before me? Why should you blush"

"Can I have deceived myself?" said Fouquet; "and can I have been happy enough not to have offended you by my conduct towards you?"

"Really, Monsieur," said La Vallière, shrugging her shoulders, "you speak in enigmas, and I am too ignorant, it seems, to understand you."

"Be it so," said Fouquet; "I will not insist. Tell me only, I entreat you, that I may rely upon your full and complete forgiveness."

"I have but one reply to make to you, Monsieur," said La Vallière, somewhat impatiently, "and I hope that will satisfy you. If I knew the wrong you have done me, I would forgive you, and I do so with still greater reason since I am ignorant of the wrong you allude to."

Fouquet bit his lips, as Aramis would have done. "In that case," he said, "I may hope that, notwithstanding what has happened, our good understanding will remain undisturbed, and that you will kindly confer upon me the favor of believing in my respectful friendship."

La Vallière fancied that she now began to understand, and said to herself, "I should not have believed M. Fouquet so eager to seek the source of a favor so very recent;" and then added aloud: "Your friendship, Monsieur! you offer me your friendship! The honor, on the contrary, is mine, and I feel overpowered by it."

"I am aware, Mademoiselle," replied Fouquet, "that the friendship of the master may appear more brilliant and desirable than that of the servant; but I assure you the latter will be quite as devoted, quite as faithful, and altogether disinterested."

La Vallière bowed, for in fact the voice of the superintendent seemed to convey both conviction and real devotion in its tone, and she held out her hand to him, saying, "I believe you."

Fouquet eagerly took the hand that the young girl extended to him. "You see no difficulty, therefore," he added, "in restoring me that unhappy letter?"

"What letter?" inquired La Vallière.

Fouquet interrogated her with his most searching gaze, as he had already done before; but the same innocent expression, the same candid look, met his. "I am obliged to confess, Mademoiselle," he said, after this denial, "that your system is the most delicate in the world, and I should

not feel that I was a man of honor if I were to suspect anything of a woman so generous as yourself."

"Really, M. Fouquet," replied La Vallière, "it is with profound regret that I am obliged to repeat that I absolutely understand nothing of what you refer to."

"In fact, then, upon your honor, Mademoiselle, you have not received any letter from me?"

"Upon my honor, none," replied La Vallière, firmly.

"Very well, that is quite sufficient; permit me, then, Mademoiselle, to renew the assurance of my utmost esteem and respect," said Fouquet. Then, bowing, he left the room to seek Aramis, who was waiting for him in his own apartment, and leaving La Vallière to ask herself whether the superintendent had not lost his senses.

"Well," inquired Aramis, who was impatiently awaiting Fouquet's return, "are you quite satisfied with the favorite?"

"Enchanted!" replied Fouquet; "she is a woman full of intelligence and fine feeling."

"She did not get angry, then?"

"Far from that, she did not even seem to understand."

"To understand what?"

"To understand that I had written to her."

"She must, however, have understood you sufficiently to give the letter back to you, for I presume she returned it."

"Not at all."

"At least, you satisfied yourself that she had burned it."

"My dear M. d'Herblay, I have been playing at cross purposes for more than an hour; and however amusing it may be, I begin to have had enough of this game. So understand me thoroughly. The girl pretended not to

understand what I was saying to her; she denied having received any letter; therefore, having positively denied its receipt, she was unable either to return or to burn it."

"Oh!" said Aramis, with uneasiness, "what is that you say?"

"I say that she swore most positively she had not received any letter."

"That is too much. And you did not insist?"

"On the contrary, I did insist, almost impertinently so, even."

"And she persisted in her denial?"

"Unhesitatingly."

"And she did not contradict herself once?"

"Not once."

"But in that case, my friend, you have left our letter in her hands?"

"How could I do otherwise?"

"Oh, it was a great mistake!"

"What the deuce would you have done in my place?"

"One could not force her, certainly; but it is very embarrassing. Such a letter ought not to remain in existence against us."

"Oh, the young girl's disposition is generosity itself; I read her eyes, and I am convinced of it."

"You think she can be relied upon?"

"From my heart I do."

"Well, I think we are mistaken."

"In what way!"

"I think that, in point of fact, as she herself told you, she did not receive the letter."

"What! do you suppose —"

"I suppose that, from some motive, of which we know nothing, your man did not deliver the letter to her."

Fouquet rang the bell. A servant appeared. "Send Toby here," he said.

A moment afterwards a man made his appearance, with a restless look, a shrewd expression about the mouth, with short arms, and his back somewhat bent. Aramis fixed a penetrating look upon him.

"Will you allow me to ask him a few questions myself?" inquired Aramis.

"Do so," said Fouquet.

Aramis was about to say something to the lackey, when he paused. "No," he said; "he would see that we attach too much importance to his answer. Question him yourself; I will pretend to write." Aramis accordingly placed himself at a table, his back turned towards the old attendant, whose every gesture and look he watched in a looking-glass opposite to him.

"Come here, Toby!" said Fouquet to the valet, who approached with a tolerably firm step. "How did you execute my commission?" inquired Fouquet.

"In the usual way, Monseigneur," replied the man.

"But how? Tell me."

"I succeeded in penetrating as far as Mademoiselle de la Vallière's apartment; but she was at Mass, and so I placed the note on her toilet-table. Is not that what you told me to do?"

"Precisely; and is that all?"

"Absolutely all, Monseigneur."

"No one was there?"

"No one."

"Did you conceal yourself as I told you?"

"Yes."

"And she returned?"

"Ten minutes afterwards."

"And no one could have taken the letter?"

"No one; for no one had entered the room."

"From the outside; but from the interior?"

"From the place where I was secreted, I could see to the very end of the room."

"Now, listen to me," said Fouquet, looking fixedly at the lackey: "if this letter failed to reach its proper destination, confess it; for if a mistake has been made, your head shall be the forfeit."

Toby started, but immediately recovered himself. "Monseigneur," he said, "I put the letter in the very place I told you; and I ask only half an hour to prove to you that the letter is in Mademoiselle de la Vallière's hands, or to bring you back the letter itself."

Aramis looked at the valet scrutinizingly. Fouquet was naturally disposed to place confidence in people, and for twenty years this man had served him faithfully. "Go," he said; "but bring me the proof you speak of." The lackey quitted the room.

"Well, what do you think of it?" inquired Fouquet of Aramis.

"I think that you must, by some means or other, assure yourself of the truth. I think that the letter either has or has not reached La Vallière, — that, in the first case, La Vallière must return it to you, or satisfy you by burning it in your presence; that in the second, you must have the letter back again, even were it to cost you a million. Come, is not that your opinion?"

"Yes; but still, my dear bishop, I believe that you are exaggerating the situation."

"Blind! how blind you are!" murmured Aramis.

"La Vallière," returned Fouquet, "whom we assume to be a politician of the greatest ability, is simply nothing more than a coquette, who hopes that I shall pay my court to her because I have already done so, and who,

now that she has received a confirmation of the king's regard, hopes to keep me in leading strings with the letter. It is natural enough!"

Aramis shook his head.

"Is not that your opinion?" said Fouquet.

"She is not a coquette," he replied.

"Allow me to tell you —"

"Oh, I am well enough acquainted with women who are coquettes!" said Aramis.

"My dear friend!"

"It is a long time since I finished my studies, you mean. But women do not change."

"True; but men change, and you at the present day are far more suspicious than you formerly were;" and then, beginning to laugh, he added, "Come, if La Vallière is willing to love me only to the extent of a third and the king two thirds, do you think the condition acceptable?"

Aramis rose impatiently. "La Vallière," he said, "has never loved, and will never love, any one but the king."

"At all events," said Fouquet, "what would you do?"

"Ask me rather what I would have done."

"Well, what would you have done?"

"In the first place, I should not have allowed that man to go away."

"Toby!"

"Yes; Toby is a traitor. Nay, I am sure of it, and I would not have let him go until he had told me the truth."

"There is still time. I will recall him, and do you question him in your turn."

"Agreed!"

"But I assure you it is quite useless. He has been with me for the last twenty years, and has never occasioned me the slightest embarrassment; and yet," added Fouquet, laughing, "it would have been easy enough."

"Still, call him back! This morning I fancy I saw that man in earnest conversation with one of M. Colbert's men."

"Where was that?"

"Opposite the stables."

"Bah! all my people are at drawn daggers with those of that fellow."

"I saw him, I tell you; and his face, which I did not at first recognize when he entered just now, struck me in a disagreeable manner."

"Why did you not say something, then, while he was here?"

"Because it is only at this very minute that my memory is clear upon the subject."

"Really," said Fouquet, "you alarm me;" and he again rang the bell.

"Provided that it is not already too late," said Aramis.

Fouquet once more rang impatiently. The valet usually in attendance appeared. "Toby!" said Fouquet, "send Toby!" The valet again shut the door.

"You leave me at perfect liberty, I suppose?"

"Entirely so."

"I may employ all means, then, to ascertain the truth."

"All."

"Intimidation, even?"

"I constitute you public prosecutor in my place."

They waited ten minutes longer, but in vain; and Fouquet, thoroughly out of patience, again rang loudly. "Toby!" he exclaimed.

"Monseigneur," said the valet, "they are looking for him."

"He cannot be far distant. I have not given him any commission to execute."

"I will go and see, Monseigneur," replied the valet, as he closed the door.

Aramis during this interval walked impatiently but silently up and down the study. Again they waited another ten minutes. Fouquet rang in a manner to awaken a whole city of the dead. The valet again presented himself, trembling in a way to induce a belief that he was the bearer of bad news.

"Monseigneur is mistaken," he said, before even Fouquet could question him; "you must have given Toby some commission, for he has been to the stables and taken your Lordship's swiftest horse, and saddled it himself."

"Well?"

"And he has gone off."

"Gone!" exclaimed Fouquet. "Let him be pursued, let him be captured."

"Nay, nay," said Aramis, taking him by the hand, "be calm; the evil is done now."

"The evil is done, you say?"

"No doubt; I was sure of it. And now let us give no cause for suspicion; we must calculate the result of the blow and ward it off, if possible."

"After all," said Fouquet, "the evil is not great."

"You think so?" said Aramis.

"Of course. Surely a man is allowed to write a love-letter to a woman."

"A man, certainly; a subject, no, — especially when the woman in question is one with whom the king is in love."

"But, my friend, the king was not in love with La Vallière a week ago; he was not in love with her yesterday, and the letter is dated yesterday. I could not guess the king was in love, when the king's affection was not even yet in existence."

"As you please," replied Aramis; "but unfortunately the letter is not dated, and it is that circumstance partic-

ularly which annoys me. If it had only been dated yesterday, I should not have the slightest shadow of uneasiness on your account."

Fouquet shrugged his shoulders. "Am I not my own master," he said; "and is the king, then, king of my brain and of my flesh?"

"You are right," replied Aramis; "do not let us give more importance to matters than is necessary; and besides — Well, if we are menaced, we have means of defence."

"Oh, menaced!" said Fouquet, "you do not place this gnat-bite as it were among the number of menaces which may compromise my fortunes and my life, do you?"

"Do not forget, M. Fouquet, that the bite of an insect can kill a giant, if the insect be venomous."

"But has this sovereign power you were speaking of already vanished?"

"I am all-powerful, it is true, but I am not immortal."

"Come, then, the most pressing matter is to find Toby again, I suppose. Is not that your opinion?"

"Oh! as for that, you will not find him again," said Aramis; "and if he was of any great value to you, you must give him up for lost."

"At all events, he is somewhere in the world," said Fouquet.

"You are right; let me act," replied Aramis.

CHAPTER VI.

MADAME'S FOUR CHANCES.

ANNE OF AUSTRIA had begged the young queen to pay her a visit. For some time past suffering most acutely, and losing both her youth and beauty with that rapidity which marks the decline of women for whom life has been a long contest, Anne of Austria had, in addition to her physical sufferings, to experience the bitterness of being no longer held in any esteem, except as a living remembrance of the past, amid the youthful beauties, wits, and powers of her court. Her physician's opinions, her mirror also, grieved her far less than the inexorable warnings which the society of the courtiers afforded, who, like the rats in a ship, abandon the hold into which the water is on the point of penetrating, owing to the ravages of decay.

Anne of Austria did not feel satisfied with the time her eldest son devoted to her. The king, a good son rather from affectation than from affection, had at first been in the habit of passing an hour in the morning and one in the evening with his mother; but since he had himself undertaken the conduct of State affairs, the duration of the morning and evening visits had been reduced to half an hour each; and then, by degrees, the morning visit had been omitted altogether. They met at Mass; the evening visit was replaced by a meeting either at the king's assembly or at Madame's, which the queen attended obligingly enough, out of regard to her two sons. The result was that Madame had acquired an immense influence over the

court, which made her apartments the true royal place of meeting. This Anne of Austria had perceived; feeling herself to be suffering, and condemned by her sufferings to frequent solitude, she was distressed at the idea that the greater part of her future days and evenings would pass away solitary, useless, and in despondency. She recalled with terror the isolation in which Cardinal Richelieu had formerly left her, — those dreaded and insupportable evenings during which, however, she had for consolation youth and beauty, which are always accompanied by hope. She next formed the project of transporting the court to her own apartments, and of attracting Madame, with her brilliant escort, to her gloomy and already sorrowful abode, where the widow of a king of France and the mother of a king of France was reduced to console, in her anticipated widowhood, the always weeping wife of a king of France.

Anne began to reflect. She had intrigued a good deal in her life. In the good times past, when her youthful mind nursed projects which were invariably successful, she then had by her side, to stimulate her ambition and her love, a friend of her own sex, more eager, more ambitious than herself, — a friend who had loved her (a rare circumstance at court), and whom some petty considerations had removed from her forever. But for many years past — except Madame de Motteville, and La Molena, her Spanish nurse, a confidante in her character of countrywoman and woman too — who could boast of having given good advice to the queen; or who, among all the youthful heads there, could recall the past for her, — that past in which alone she lived?

Anne of Austria remembered Madame de Chevreuse, in the first place exiled rather by her wish than by the king's, and then dying in exile, the wife of a gentleman of obscure birth and position. She asked herself what Madame de

Chevreuse would formerly have advised her in a similar circumstance, in the mutual difficulties arising from their intrigues; and after serious reflection it seemed as if her clever, subtle friend, full of experience and sound judgment, answered her in her ironical tone: "All these insignificant young people are poor and greedy of gain. They require gold and incomes to support their pleasures; it is by interest you must gain them over." Anne of Austria adopted this plan. Her purse was well filled, and she had at her disposal a considerable sum of money, which had been amassed by Mazarin for her, and lodged in a place of safety. She possessed the most magnificent jewels in France, among which, and especially worthy of mention, were pearls so large that they made the king sigh every time he saw them, because the pearls of his crown were like millet-seed compared to them.

Anne of Austria no longer had beauty or charms at her disposal. She gave out, therefore, that her wealth was great; and as an inducement for others to visit her apartments, she let it be known that there were good gold crowns to be won at play, or that handsome presents were likely to be given on days when all went well with her, or annuities which she had wrung from the king by entreaty in order to maintain her credit. And in the first place she tried these means upon Madame, because to gain her consent was of more importance than anything else. Madame, notwithstanding the bold confidence with which her youth and her talents inspired her, blindly ran head-foremost into the net which had been stretched out before her. Enriched by degrees by these presents and transfers of property, she took a fancy to these inheritances by anticipation. Anne of Austria adopted the same means towards Monsieur, and even towards the king himself. She instituted lotteries in her apartments.

The day on which the present chapter opens, invitations had been issued for a late supper in the queen-mother's apartments, as she intended that two beautiful diamond bracelets of exquisite workmanship should be put up for lottery. The medallions were antique cameos of the greatest value; the diamonds, in point of intrinsic value, did not represent a very considerable amount, but the originality and rarity of the workmanship were such that every one at court not only wished to possess the bracelets, but even to see them on the arms of the queen herself; and on the days when she wore them, it was considered a favor to be allowed to admire them in kissing her hands. The courtiers had, even with regard to this subject, adopted various expressions of gallantry to establish the aphorism that the bracelets would have been priceless in value if they had not been unfortunate enough to be placed in contact with arms as beautiful as the queen's. This compliment had been honored by a translation into all the languages of Europe, and numerous were the verses in Latin and French which had been circulated on the subject.

The day when Anne of Austria determined upon a lottery was in a critical period. The king had not been near his mother for two days. Madame, after the great scene of the dryads and naiads, was sulking by herself. The king's fit of sulkiness was over, but an all-absorbing occupation of mind raised him above the stormy disputes and the giddy pleasures of the court.

Anne of Austria effected a diversion by the announcement of the famous lottery to take place in her apartments on the following evening. With this object in view, she saw the young queen, whom, as we already know, she had invited to pay her a visit in the morning. "My daughter," she said to her, "I have good news to tell you;

the king has been saying the most tender things to me about you. He is young, you know, and easily drawn away; but so long as you keep near me, he will not venture to keep away from you, — to whom, besides, he is most warmly and affectionately attached. I intend to have a lottery this evening, and shall expect to see you."

"I have heard," said the young queen, with a sort of timid reproach, "that your Majesty intends to put in lottery those beautiful bracelets whose rarity is so great that we ought not to allow them to pass out of the custody of the crown, even were there no other reason than that they had once belonged to you."

"My daughter," said Anne of Austria, who read the young queen's thoughts, and wished to console her for not having received the bracelets as a present, "it is necessary that I should attract Madame always to my apartments."

"Madame!" said the young queen, blushing.

"Of course; would you not prefer to have a rival near you, whom you could watch and rule over, than to know that the king is with her, always as ready to flirt with her as she with him. The lottery I have proposed is my means of attraction for that purpose; do you blame me?"

"Oh, no!" returned Maria Theresa, clapping her hands with a childlike expression of delight.

"And you no longer regret, then, my dear, that I did not give you these bracelets, as I had at first intended to do?"

"Oh, no, no, my kind mother!"

"Very well, my dear daughter; make yourself look as beautiful as possible, that our supper may be very brilliant; the gayer you seem, the more charming you appear, and you will eclipse all the ladies present as much by your brilliancy as by your rank."

Maria Theresa left full of delight. An hour afterwards, Anne of Austria received a visit from Madame, whom she covered with caresses, saying, "Excellent news! the king is charmed with my lottery."

"But I," replied Madame, "am not quite so charmed; to see such beautiful bracelets on any one's arms but yours or mine is what I cannot reconcile myself to."

"Well, well," said Anne of Austria, concealing by a smile a violent pain which she had just experienced, "do not alarm yourself, young lady, and do not look at things in the worst light immediately."

"Ah, Madame, Fortune is blind, and I am told there are two hundred tickets."

"Quite as many as that; but you cannot surely forget that there can be only one winner."

"No doubt. But who will that be? Can you tell?" said Madame, in despair.

"You remind me that I had a dream last night; my dreams are always good, — I sleep so little."

"What was your dream? — But are you suffering?"

"No," said the queen, stifling with wonderful command the torture of a renewed attack of shooting pains in her bosom; "I dreamed that the king won the bracelets."

"The king?"

"You are going to ask me, I think, what the king could possibly do with the bracelets?"

"Yes."

"And you would not add, perhaps, that it would be very fortunate if the king were really to win, for he would be obliged to give the bracelets to some one else."

"To restore them to you, for instance."

"In which case I should immediately give them away; for you do not think," said the queen, laughing, "that I have put these bracelets up for lottery from necessity.

My object was to give them without arousing any one's jealousy; but if Fortune should not get me out of my difficulty—well, I would teach Fortune a lesson, and I know very well to whom I would offer the bracelets." These words were accompanied by so expressive a smile that Madame could not resist paying her by a grateful kiss.

"But," added Anne of Austria, "do you not know as well as I do, that if the king were to win the bracelets, he would not restore them to me?"

"You mean he would give them to the queen?"

"No, and for the very same reason that he would not give them back again to me; since, if I had wished to make the queen a present of them, I had no need of him for that purpose."

Madame cast a side-glance upon the bracelets, which in their casket were dazzlingly exposed to view upon a table close beside her.

"How beautiful they are!" she said, sighing. "But stay!" Madame continued; "we are quite forgetting that your Majesty's dream is nothing but a dream."

"I should be very much surprised," returned Anne of Austria, "if my dream were to deceive me; that has happened to me very seldom."

"We may look upon you as a prophetess, then."

"I have already said, my daughter, that I dream but very rarely; but the coincidence of my dream about this matter with my own ideas is extraordinary,—it agrees so wonderfully with my own views and arrangements."

"What arrangements do you allude to?"

"That you will win the bracelets, for instance."

"In that case it will not be the king."

"Oh," said Anne of Austria, "there is not such a very great distance between his Majesty's heart and your own; for are you not his beloved sister? There is not, I repeat,

so very wide a distance that my dream can be pronounced false. Come, let us reckon up the chances in your favor."

"I will count them."

"In the first place, we will begin with the dream. If the king wins, he is sure to give you the bracelets."

"I admit that is one."

"If you win them, they are yours."

"Naturally! that may be admitted also."

"Lastly, — if Monsieur were to win them!"

"Oh!" said Madame, laughing heartily, "he would give them to the Chevalier de Lorraine."

Anne of Austria laughed as heartily as her daughter-in-law; so freely, indeed, that her sufferings again returned, and made her turn suddenly pale at the very height of her mirth.

"What is the matter?" inquired Madame, alarmed.

"Nothing, nothing, — a pain in my side. I have been laughing too much. We were at the fourth chance, I think."

"Oh, that I cannot see!"

"I beg your pardon. I am not excluded from the chance of winning; and if I be the winner, you are sure of me."

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" exclaimed Madame.

"I hope you look upon yourself as one whose chances are good, and that my dream now begins to assume the solid form of reality."

"Yes, indeed, you give me both hope and confidence," said Madame; "and the bracelets won in this manner will be a hundred times more precious to me.'

"Well, then, good-by until this evening;" and the princesses separated.

Anne of Austria, after her daughter-in-law had left her,

said to herself, as she examined the bracelets, "They are indeed precious, since by their means this evening I shall have won over a heart to my side, and at the same time shall have penetrated a secret." Then, turning towards the deserted alcove in her room, she said, addressing vacancy, "Is it not thus that you would have acted, my poor Chevreuse? Yes, yes; I know it is."

And, like a perfume of days gone by, her youth, her playful imagination, and her happiness seemed to return to her with the echo of this invocation.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LOTTERY.

At eight o'clock in the evening, every one had assembled in the queen-mother's apartments. Anne of Austria, in full dress, beautiful still, with the remains of her former loveliness, and aided by all the resources which coquetry can command at the hands of clever assistants, concealed, or rather pretended to conceal, from the crowd of young courtiers who surrounded her, and who still admired her, — thanks to the combination of circumstances which we have indicated in the preceding chapter, — the ravages, which were already visible, of the acute suffering to which she finally succumbed a few years later. Madame, almost as great a coquette as Anne of Austria, and the queen, simple and natural as usual, were seated beside her, each contending for her good graces.

The ladies of honor, united in a body in order to resist with greater effect and consequently with more success the witty and lively conversations which the young men held with them, were enabled, like a battalion formed in square, to offer one another mutual aid in attack and defence. Montalais, skilled in that skirmishing warfare, protected the whole line by the rolling fire which she directed against the enemy. De Saint-Aignan, in utter despair at the rigor of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, which became insolent in its obstinacy, tried to turn his back upon her; but overcome by the irresistible brilliancy of the

beauty's great eyes, he every moment returned to confirm his defeat by new submissions, to which Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente did not fail to reply by fresh acts of impertinence. De Saint-Aignan did not know to what patron saint to appeal. La Vallière had about her not exactly a court, but a small nucleus of courtiers. De Saint-Aignan, hoping by this manœuvre to attract Athenais's attention towards him, had approached the young girl, and saluted her with a respect which induced some slow-going persons to believe that he wished to console himself for Athenais by Louise. These, however, were persons who had neither been witnesses of the scene during the shower, nor had heard it spoken of. But as the majority were already informed, and well informed too on the matter, the acknowledged favor with which she was regarded had attracted to her side some of the most astute as well as the least sensible members of the court, — the former, because they said with Montaigne, "What do I know?" and the latter, because they said with Rabelais, "It is likely." The greatest number had followed in the wake of the latter, just as in hunting five or six of the best hounds alone follow the scent of the animal hunted, while the remainder of the pack follow only the scent of the hounds.

The two princesses and the queen examined with particular attention the toilets of their ladies and maids of honor as well as those of the other women; and they condescended to forget that they were queens in recollecting that they were women. In other words, they pitilessly tore in pieces every petticoat-wearer there, as Molière would have said. The looks of both princesses simultaneously fell upon La Vallière, who, as we have just said, was completely surrounded at that moment. Madame knew not what pity was, and said to the queen-mother, bending towards her,

"Indeed, if Fortune were just, she would favor that poor little La Vallière."

"That is not possible," said the queen-mother, smiling.

"Why not?"

"There are only two hundred tickets, so that it was not possible to inscribe every one's name on the list."

"And hers is not there, then?"

"No!"

"What a pity! She might have won them, and then sold them."

"Sold them!" exclaimed the queen.

"Yes; it would have been a dowry for her, and she would not have been obliged to marry without her *trousseau*, as will probably be the case."

"Really?" answered the queen-mother. "Poor little thing! has she no dresses, then?" and she pronounced these words like a woman who has never been able to understand the inconveniences of a slenderly filled purse.

"Stay, look at her! Heaven forgive me, if she is not wearing the very same skirt this evening that she had on this morning during the drive, and which she managed to keep clean, thanks to the care the king took of her in sheltering her from the rain."

At the very moment Madame uttered these words the king entered the room. The two princesses would not perhaps have observed his arrival, so completely were they occupied in their ill-natured remarks, had not Madame noticed that all at once La Vallière, who was standing up facing the gallery, exhibited certain signs of confusion, and then said a few words to the courtiers who surrounded her, who immediately dispersed. This movement induced Madame to look towards the door, and at that moment the captain of the Guards announced the king. At this

announcement La Vallière, who had hitherto kept her eyes fixed upon the gallery, suddenly cast them down as the king entered

His Majesty was dressed magnificently and in the most perfect taste; he was conversing with Monsieur and the Duc de Roquelaure, — Monsieur on his right and the Duc de Roquelaure on his left. The king advanced in the first place towards the queens, to whom he bowed with an air of graceful respect. He took his mother's hand and kissed it, addressed a few compliments to Madame upon the elegance of her toilet, and then began to make the round of the assembly. La Vallière was saluted in the same manner as the others, with neither more nor less attention. His Majesty then returned to his mother and his wife. When the courtiers noticed that the king had only addressed some ordinary remark to the young girl who had been so particularly noticed in the morning, they immediately drew their own conclusion to account for this coldness of manner, — this conclusion being that although the king might have taken a sudden fancy to her, that fancy had already disappeared. One thing, however, might have been remarked, — that close beside La Vallière, among the number of the courtiers, M. Fouquet was to be seen; and his respectfully attentive manner served to sustain the young girl in the midst of the varied emotions which visibly agitated her.

M. Fouquet was just on the point, moreover, of speaking in a more friendly manner with Mademoiselle de la Vallière, when M. Colbert approached, and after having bowed to Fouquet with all the formality which the rules of the most respectful politeness could require, seemed determined to take his position beside La Vallière for the purpose of entering into conversation with her. Fouquet immediately yielded his place. This proceeding was

eagerly taken in by the eyes of Montalais and Malicorne, who mutually exchanged their several observations on the subject. De Guiche, standing within the embrasure of a window, saw no one but Madame. But as Madame, on her side, frequently glanced at La Vallière, De Guiche's eyes following Madame's were from time to time cast upon the young girl.

La Vallière instinctively felt herself sinking beneath the weight of all the different looks, inspired, some by interest, others by envy. She had nothing to compensate her for her sufferings, — not a kind word from her companions, nor a look of affection from the king. The misery the poor girl was suffering was unspeakable.

The queen-mother now directed the small table to be brought forward, on which the lottery tickets were placed, two hundred in number, and begged Madame de Motteville to read the list of the chosen. It was a matter of course that this list had been drawn up in strict accordance with the laws of etiquette; the king's name was first on the list, next that of the queen-mother, the queen, Monsieur, Madame, and so on. All hearts throbbed anxiously as the list was read aloud; more than three hundred persons had been invited, and each of them was anxious to learn whether his or her name was likely to be found among the number of privileged names. The king listened with as much attention as the others; and when the last name had been pronounced, he saw that La Vallière had been omitted from the list. Every one, of course, could remark this omission. The king flushed as if he had been much annoyed; but La Vallière, gentle and resigned as usual, gave no sign of having noticed it. While the list was being read, the king had not taken his eyes off the young girl, who seemed to expand, as it were, beneath the happy influence which she felt was shed around her, and who was too delighted and

too pure in spirit for any other thought than that of love to find an entrance either to her mind or to her heart. Acknowledging this touching self-denial by the fixedness of his attention, the king showed La Vallière that he appreciated its delicacy. When the list was finished, the faces of the different ladies who had been omitted or forgotten fully expressed their disappointment. Malicorne also was forgotten among the number of men; and the grimace he made plainly said to Montalais, who was also forgotten, "Cannot we contrive to arrange matters with Fortune in such a manner that she shall not forget us?" to which a smile full of intelligence from Mademoiselle Aure, replied, "Certainly we can."

The tickets were distributed to each person according to his or her number. The king received his first, next the queen-mother, then Monsieur, then the queen and Madame, and so on. After this, Anne of Austria opened a small Spanish leather bag, containing two hundred numbers engraved upon small balls of mother-of-pearl, and presented the open sack to the youngest of her maids of honor, that she might take one of the balls out of it. The eager expectation, amid all these tediously slow preparations, was rather that of avidity than of curiosity. De Saint-Aignan bent towards Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente to whisper to her, "Since we have each a number, Mademoiselle, let us unite our two chances. The bracelet shall be yours if I win; and if you are successful, deign to give me but one look of your beautiful eyes."

"No," said Athenais; "if you win the bracelet, keep it, — every one for himself."

"You are without any pity," said De Saint-Aignan, "and I will punish you by a quatrain, —

'Beautiful Iris, to my vows
You are too opposed —'"

"Silence!" said Athenais, "you will prevent me from hearing the winning number."

"Number one," said the young girl who had drawn the mother-of-pearl ball from the Spanish leather bag.

"The king!" exclaimed the queen-mother.

"The king has won!" repeated the queen, delightedly.

"Oh! the king! your dream! said Madame, joyously, in the ear of Anne of Austria.

The king was the only one who did not exhibit any satisfaction. He merely thanked Fortune for what she had done for him, by addressing a slight reverence to the young girl who had been chosen as the proxy of the swift-winged goddess. Then, receiving from the hands of Anne of Austria, amid the envious murmurs of the whole assembly, the casket enclosing the bracelets, he said, "Are these bracelets really beautiful, then?"

"Look at them," said Anne of Austria, "and judge for yourself."

The king looked at them, and said, "Yes, indeed, an admirable medallion. What perfect finish!"

"What perfect finish!" repeated Madame.

Queen Maria Theresa easily saw, and that too at the very first glance, that the king would not offer the bracelets to her; but as he did not seem in the least degree disposed to offer them to Madame, she felt satisfied, or nearly so. The king sat down. The most intimate among the courtiers approached, one by one, to admire more closely the beautiful piece of workmanship, which soon with the king's permission was passed about from hand to hand. Soon every one, connoisseur or not, was uttering various exclamations of surprise, and overwhelming the king with congratulations. There was, in fact, something for every one to admire, — the brilliants for some, and the cutting for others. The ladies visibly displayed

their impatience at seeing such a treasure monopolized by the gentlemen.

"Messieurs, Messieurs," said the king, whom nothing escaped, "one would almost think that you wore bracelets as the Sabines used to do; hand them over to the ladies for a little while, who seem to me to have a just claim to understand such matters better than you."

These words appeared to Madame the beginning of a decision which she expected. She gathered, besides, this happy belief from the glances of the queen-mother. The courtier who held them at the moment when the king made this remark, amid the general excitement hastened to place the bracelets in the hands of Queen Maria Theresa, who, knowing too well, poor woman, that they were not designed for her, hardly looked at them, and almost immediately passed them on to Madame. The latter — and Monsieur even more minutely than herself — gave the bracelets a long look of covetous desire. Then she handed the jewels to those ladies who were near her, pronouncing this single word, but with an accent which expressed as much as a long phrase, "Magnificent!"

The ladies who had received the bracelets from Madame's hands took as much time as they pleased to examine them, and then made them circulate by passing them on towards the right. During this time the king was tranquilly conversing with De Guiche and Fouquet, — or rather he let them talk, while he did not listen. Accustomed to the set form of ordinary phrases, his ear, like that of all men who exercise an incontestable superiority over others, merely selected from the conversations held about him the indispensable word which requires reply. His attention, however, was now elsewhere, for it wandered as his eyes did.

Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente was the last of the

ladies inscribed for tickets; and as if she had ranked according to her name upon the list, she had only Montalais and La Vallière after her. When the bracelets reached these two persons, no one appeared to take any further notice of them. The humble hands which for a moment touched these jewels deprived them of all their importance, — a circumstance which did not, however, prevent Montalais from starting with joy, envy, and covetous desire at the sight of the beautiful stones still more than at their magnificent workmanship. It is evident that if she were compelled to decide between pecuniary value and artistic beauty, Montalais would unhesitatingly have preferred the diamonds to the cameos; and her disinclination. therefore, to pass them to her companion, La Vallière, was very great. La Vallière fixed a look almost of indifference upon the jewels.

"Oh, how rich, how magnificent these bracelets are!" exclaimed Montalais; "and yet you do not go into ecstasies about them, Louise! You are no true woman, I am sure."

"Yes, I am indeed," replied the young girl, with an accent of the most charming melancholy; "but why desire that which cannot be ours?"

The king, his head bent forward, listened to what the young girl was saying. Hardly had the vibration of her voice reached his ear than he rose radiant with delight, and passing across the whole circle, from the place where he stood, to La Vallière, "You are mistaken, Mademoiselle," he said; "you are a woman, and every woman has a right to wear jewels, which are made for woman."

"Oh, Sire!" said La Vallière, "will not your Majesty believe absolutely in my modesty?"

"I believe you possess every virtue, Mademoiselle, — frankness as well as every other; I entreat you, therefore, to say frankly what you think of these bracelets."

"I think that they are beautiful, Sire, and cannot be offered to any other than a queen."

"I am delighted that such is your opinion, Mademoiselle; the bracelets are yours, and the king begs you to accept them."

And as with a movement almost resembling terror La Vallière eagerly held out the casket to the king, the king gently pushed back La Vallière's trembling hand. A silence of astonishment more profound than that of death reigned in the assembly; and yet, from the side where the queens were, no one had heard what he had said, nor understood what he had done. A charitable friend, however, took upon herself to spread the news; it was Tonnay-Charente, to whom Madame had made a sign to approach.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Tonnay-Charente, "how happy that La Vallière is! The king has just given her the bracelets."

Madame bit her lips to such a degree that the blood appeared upon the surface of the skin. The young queen looked first at La Vallière and then at Madame, and began to laugh. Anne of Austria rested her chin upon her beautiful white hand, and remained for a long time absorbed by a suspicion which disturbed her mind and a cruel pain which gnawed her heart. De Guiche, observing Madame turn pale, and guessing the cause of her change of color, abruptly left the assembly and disappeared. Malicorne was then able to approach Montalais very quietly, and under cover of the general din of conversation, said to her, "Aure, you have our fortune and our future close beside you."

"Yes," was her reply, as she tenderly embraced La Vallière, whom inwardly she was tempted to strangle.

CHAPTER VIII.

MALAGA.

During this long and violent contention between the ambitions of the court and the affections of the heart, one of our characters, the least deserving of neglect perhaps, was however very much neglected, very much forgotten, and exceedingly unhappy. In fact, D'Artagnan — D'Artagnan, we say, for we must call him by his name, to remind our readers of his existence — had absolutely nothing whatever to do amid this brilliant, light-hearted world of fashion. After having followed the king during two whole days at Fontainebleau, and having critically observed all the pastoral fancies and heroicomic travesties of his sovereign, the musketeer felt that he needed something more than this to satisfy the cravings of his existence. At every moment assailed by persons who asked him, "How do you think this costume suits me, M. d'Artagnan?" he would reply to them in bland, sarcastic tones, "Why, I think you are quite as well dressed as the finest monkey to be found in the fair at St. Laurent." It was just such a compliment as D'Artagnan usually paid where he did not feel disposed to pay any other; and whether agreeable or not, the inquirer was obliged to be satisfied with it. And whenever any one asked him, "M. d'Artagnan, how do you intend to dress yourself this evening?" he replied, "I shall undress myself," at which all the ladies laughed. But after a couple of days passed in this manner, the musketeer, perceiving

that nothing serious was likely to arise which could concern him, and that the king had completely — or at least appeared to have completely — forgotten Paris, St. Mandé, and Belle-Isle; that M. Colbert's mind was occupied with illuminations and fireworks; that for the next month, at least, the ladies had glances to bestow and receive, — asked the king for leave of absence for a matter of private business. At the moment D'Artagnan made his request, his Majesty was on the point of going to bed, quite exhausted from dancing.

"You wish to leave me, M. d'Artagnan?" inquired the king, with an air of astonishment; for Louis XIV. could never understand that any one who might have the distinguished honor of being near him could wish to be separated from him.

"Sire," said D'Artagnan, "I leave you simply because I am not of the slightest service to you in anything. Ah, if I could only hold the balancing-pole while you were dancing, it would be a very different matter."

"But, my dear M. d'Artagnan," said the king, gravely, "people dance without a balancing-pole."

"Ah, indeed!" said the musketeer, maintaining his imperceptible tone of irony, "I had no idea at all of that."

"You have not seen me dance, then?" inquired the king.

"Yes; but I believed it would give place to matters requiring greater force. I was mistaken, — a greater reason, therefore, why I should withdraw. Sire, I repeat, you have no present occasion for my services; besides, if your Majesty should have any need of me, you would know where to find me."

"Very well," said the king; and he granted him his leave of absence.

We shall not look for D'Artagnan, therefore, at Fon-

tainebleau, for this would be quite useless; but with the permission of our readers we shall find him in the Rue des Lombards, at the sign of the Pilon d'Or, in the house of our old friend Planchet. It was about eight o'clock in the evening, and the weather was exceedingly warm; there was only one window open, and that one belonging to a room on the *entresol*. A perfume of spices, mingled with another perfume less exotic but more penetrating, — namely, that which arose from the street, — ascended to the nostrils of the musketeer.

D'Artagnan, reclining upon an immense flat-backed chair, with his legs not stretched out, but simply placed upon a stool, formed the most obtuse angle that was ever seen. Both his arms were crossed over his head, his head reclining upon his left shoulder, in the manner of Alexander the Great. His eyes, usually so quick and intelligent in their expression, were now half closed, and were fixed upon a small corner of blue sky which was visible behind the opening of the chimneys; there was just enough blue to use if it were necessary to set a piece into one of the sacks of lentils, or beans, which formed the principal furniture of the shop on the ground floor. Thus extended at his ease, and thus sheltered in his place of observation behind the window, D'Artagnan seemed no longer a soldier, no longer an officer of the palace, but a citizen in a state of stagnation between his dinner and supper, or between his supper and his bed, — with one of those strong, ossified brains, which have no more room for a single idea, so fiercely does animal matter keep watch at the doors of intelligence, narrowly inspecting the contraband trade which might result from the introduction into the brain of a symptom of thought.

We have already said that night was closing in; the shops were being lighted, while the windows of the upper

apartments were being closed, and the irregular steps of a patrol of soldiers forming the night-watch could be heard in the distance. D'Artagnan continued to think of nothing, and to look at nothing except the blue corner of the sky. A few paces from him completely in the shade, lying on his stomach upon a sack of Indian corn, was Planchet, with both his arms under his chin, and his eyes fixed on D'Artagnan, who was either thinking, dreaming, or sleeping with his eyes open. Planchet had been watching him for a tolerably long time, and by way of interruption, began by exclaiming, "Hum! hum!" But D'Artagnan did not stir. Planchet then saw that it was necessary to have recourse to some more effectual means. After mature deliberation, the most ingenious means which suggested itself to him in the present circumstances was to let himself roll off the sack to the floor, murmuring at the same time against himself the word "Stupid." But whatever was the noise produced by Planchet's fall, D'Artagnan, who had in the course of his existence heard many other noises, did not appear to pay the least attention to it. Besides, an enormous cart laden with stones, passing from the Rue St. Médéric, overcame by the noise of its wheels the noise of Planchet's fall. And yet Planchet fancied that, in token of tacit approval, he saw the musketeer imperceptibly smile at the word "Stupid." This emboldened him to say, "Are you asleep, M. d'Artagnan?"

"No, Planchet, I am not even asleep," replied the musketeer.

"I am in despair," said Planchet, "to hear such a word as *even*."

"Well, and why not? Is it not a good word, M. Planchet?"

"Of course, M. d'Artagnan."

"Well?"

"Well, then, the word distresses me beyond measure."

"Tell me why you are distressed, Planchet," said D'Artagnan.

"If you say that you are not *even* asleep, it is as much as to say that you have not even the consolation of being able to sleep; or better still, it is precisely the same as telling me that you are bored to death."

"Planchet, you know I am never bored."

"Except to-day and the day before yesterday."

"Bah!"

"M. d'Artagnan, it is a week since you returned from Fontainebleau; it is a week since you had any orders to issue, or your men to review and manœuvre. You need the sound of guns, drums, and all that royal din and confusion; I, who have myself carried a musket, can easily believe that."

"Planchet," replied D'Artagnan, "I assure you that I am not bored the least in the world."

"In that case what are you doing, lying there as if you were dead?"

"My dear Planchet, there was once upon a time, at the siege of La Rochelle, when I was there, when you were there, when we both were there, a certain Arab, who was celebrated for his skill in aiming culverins. He was a clever fellow, although very singular with regard to his complexion, which was of the same color as your olives. Well, this Arab, whenever he had done eating or working, used to sit down to rest himself, as I am resting now, and smoked I cannot tell you what sort of magical leaves through a long amber-mouthed tube; and if any officer happening to pass reproached him for being always asleep, he used quietly to reply, 'Better to sit down than to stand up, to lie down than to sit down, to be dead than to lie down.'"

"He was a very melancholy Arab, both from his color and from his style of conversation," said Planchet. "I remember him perfectly well. He used to cut off the heads of the Protestants with extreme satisfaction."

"Precisely; and then used to embalm them, when they were worth the trouble."

"Yes; and when he was engaged in his embalming occupations, with his herbs and other plants about him, he looked like a basket-maker making baskets."

"You are quite right, Planchet; he did so."

"Oh, I can remember things too."

"I have no doubt of it; but what do you think of his mode of reasoning?"

"I think it very good in one sense, Monsieur, but very stupid in another."

"Explain, Planchet, explain."

"Well, Monsieur, in point of fact, then, 'Better to sit down than to stand up,' is plain enough, especially when one may be fatigued under certain circumstances;" and Planchet smiled in a roguish way. "As for 'Better to be lying down than sitting down,' let that pass; but as for the last proposition, that it is 'better to be dead than lying down,' it is, in my opinion, very absurd, my own undoubted preference being for my bed; and if you are not of my opinion, it is simply, as I have already had the honor of telling you, because you are boring yourself to death."

"Planchet, do you know M. La Fontaine?"

"The chemist at the corner of the Rue St. Médéric?"

"No; the writer of fables?"

"Oh! Maître Corbeau!"

"Exactly so; well, then, I am like his hare."

"He has a hare also, then?"

"He has all sorts of animals."

"Well, what does his hare do, then?"

"His hare thinks."

"Ah, ah!"

"Planchet, I am like M. La Fontaine's hare, — I am thinking."

"You 're thinking, you say?" said Planchet, uneasily.

"Yes; your house is dull enough to drive people to think. You will admit that, I hope."

"And yet, Monsieur, you have a look-out upon the street."

"Yes; and wonderfully interesting that is, of course."

"But it is no less true, Monsieur, that if you were living at the back of the house you would be bored — I mean you would think — more than ever."

"Upon my word, Planchet, I hardly know that."

"Still," said the grocer, "if your reflections were at all like those which led you to restore King Charles II.;" and Planchet finished by a little laugh which was not without its meaning.

"Ah, Planchet, my friend," returned D'Artagnan, "you are getting ambitious."

"Is there no other king to be restored, M. d'Artagnan, — no other Monk to be put into a box?"

"No, my dear Planchet; all the kings are seated on their thrones, — less comfortably so, perhaps, than I am upon this chair; but, at all events, there they are;" and D'Artagnan sighed.

"M. d'Artagnan," said Planchet, "you are making me very uneasy."

"You 're very good, Planchet."

"I have a suspicion, Heaven forgive me!"

"What is it?"

"M. d'Artagnan, you are getting thin."

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan, striking his chest, which sounded like an empty cuirass, "it is impossible, Planchet."

"Ah!" said Planchet, with effusion, "if you were to get thin in my house —"

"Well?"

"I should do something rash."

"What would you do? Tell me."

"I should look out for the man who was the cause of all your anxieties."

"Ah! according to your account, I am anxious now."

"Yes, you are anxious, and you are getting thin, visibly getting thin. *Malaga!* if you go on getting thin in this way, I will take my sword in my hand, and go straight to M. d'Herblay and have it out with him."

"What!" said M. d'Artagnan, starting in his chair, — "what's that you say, Planchet? And what has M. d'Herblay's name to do with your groceries?"

"Just as you please. Get angry if you like, or call me names if you like, but, *morbleu!* I know what I know."

D'Artagnan had, during this second outburst of Planchet, so placed himself as not to lose a single look of his face; that is, he sat with both his hands resting on his knees, and his head stretched towards the worthy grocer. "Come, explain yourself," he said, "and tell me how you could possibly utter such a blasphemy. M. d'Herblay, your old master, my friend, an ecclesiastic, a musketeer turned bishop, — would you raise your sword against him, Planchet?"

"I could raise my sword against my own father when I see you in such a state as you are now."

"M. d'Herblay, a gentleman!"

"It's all the same to me whether he's a gentleman or not. He gives you the blue devils, that is all I know; and the blue devils make people get thin. *Malaga!* I have no notion of M. d'Artagnan leaving my house thinner than he entered it."

"How does he give me the blue devils, as you call it? Come, explain, explain!"

"You have had the nightmare during the last three nights."

"I?"

"Yes, you; and in your nightmare you called out, several times, 'Aramis! sly Aramis!'"

"Ah! I said that, did I?" murmured D'Artagnan, uneasily.

"Yes, those very words, upon my honor."

"Well, what else? You know the saying, my friend, 'Dreams go by contraries.'"

"Not so; for every time during the last three days when you went out, you have not once failed to ask me on your return, 'Have you seen M. d'Herblay?' or else, 'Have you received any letters for me from M. d'Herblay?'"

"Well, it is very natural that I should take an interest in my old friend," said D'Artagnan.

"Of course; but not to such an extent as to get thin from it."

"Planchet, I'll get fatter; I give you my word of honor I will."

"Very well, Monsieur, I accept it; for I know that when you give your word of honor it is sacred."

"I will not dream of Aramis any longer, and I will never ask you again if there are any letters from M. d'Herblay; but on condition that you explain one thing to me."

"Tell me what it is, Monsieur."

"I am a great observer; and just now you made use of a very singular oath, which is unusual for you."

"You mean *Malaga!* I suppose?"

"Precisely."

"It is the oath I have used ever since I have been a grocer."

"Very proper, too; it is the name of a dried grape or raisin, I believe?"

"It is my most ferocious oath; when I have once said *Malaga!* I am a man no longer."

"Still, I never knew you to use that oath before."

"Very likely not, Monsieur. Some one gave it to me," said Planchet; and as he pronounced these words, he winked his eye with a cunning expression, which thoroughly awakened D'Artagnan's attention.

"Come, come, M. Planchet!"

"Why, I am not like you, Monsieur," said Planchet. "I don't pass my life in thinking."

"You are wrong, then."

"I mean in boring myself to death. We have but a very short time to live, — why not make the best of it?"

"You are an Epicurean philosopher, I begin to think, Planchet."

"Why not? My hand is still as steady as ever; I can write, and can weigh out my sugar and spices; my foot is firm; I can dance and walk about; my stomach has its teeth still, for I eat and digest well; my heart is not quite hardened. Well, Monsieur — "

"Well, what, Planchet?"

"Why, you see — " said the grocer, rubbing his hands together.

D'Artagnan crossed one leg over the other, and said, "Planchet, my friend, you overwhelm me with surprise!"

"How so?"

"You are revealing yourself to me in a character absolutely new."

Planchet, flattered in the highest degree by this remark, continued to rub his hands very hard together. "Ah!"

he said, "because I happen to be only stupid, you think me, perhaps, a positive fool."

"Very good, Planchet; very well reasoned."

"Follow my idea, Monsieur, if you please. I said to myself," continued Planchet, "that without enjoyment there is no happiness on this earth."

"Quite true, — what you say, Planchet," interrupted D'Artagnan.

"At all events, if we cannot obtain pleasure, — for pleasure is not so common a thing, after all, — let us at least get consolation of some kind or other."

"And so you console yourself?"

"Exactly so."

"Explain to me your method of consoling yourself."

"I put on a buckler to fight against ennui. I rule my time by patience; and on the very evening before the day on which I perceive that I am going to get bored, I amuse myself."

"Is it no more difficult than that?"

"No."

"And you found it out quite by yourself?"

"Quite so."

"It is miraculous."

"What do you say?"

"I say, that your philosophy is not to be matched in the whole world."

"You think so? Follow my example, then."

"It is a very tempting one."

"Do as I do."

"I could not wish for anything better. But all minds are not of the same stamp; and it might possibly happen that if I were required to amuse myself in the manner you do, I should bore myself horribly."

"Bah! at least try it first."

"Well, tell me what you do."

"Have you observed that I leave home occasionally?"

"Yes."

"In any particular way?"

"Periodically."

"That's the very thing. You have noticed it, then?"

"My dear Planchet, you must understand that when two persons see each other nearly every day, and one of the two absents himself, the other misses him. Do not you feel the want of my society when I am in the country?"

"Prodigiously; that is to say, I feel like a body without a soul."

"That being understood, then, let us go on."

"What are the periods when I absent myself?"

"On the 15th and 30th of every month."

"And I remain away —"

"Sometimes two, sometimes three, and sometimes four days at a time."

"Have you ever given it a thought, what I have been absent for?"

"To look after your debts, I suppose."

"And when I returned, how did you think I looked?"

"Exceedingly satisfied."

"You admit, you see, that I always look very satisfied. And to what have you attributed my satisfaction?"

"To the fact that your business was going on very well; that your purchases of rice, prunes, brown sugar, dried apples and pears, and treacle were advantageous. You were always very picturesque in your notions and ideas, Planchet; and I was not in the slightest degree surprised to find that you had selected the grocer's trade as an occupation, which is of all trades the most varied and the very pleasantest in kind, since one handles in it so many natural and perfumed productions."

"Perfectly true, Monsieur; but you are very greatly mistaken."

"In what way?"

"In thinking that I go away like that, Monsieur, every fortnight to collect my money or to make purchases. Oh! how the deuce could you have thought such a thing? Oh! oh! oh!" and Planchet began to laugh in a manner that inspired D'Artagnan with very serious misgivings as to his sanity.

"I confess," said the musketeer, "that I do not precisely catch your meaning."

"Very true, Monsieur."

"What do you mean by 'very true'?"

"It must be true, since you say it; but pray be assured that it in no way lessens my opinion of you."

"Ah! that is very fortunate."

"No. You are a man of genius; and whenever the question happens to be of war, tactics, surprises, or good honest blows to be dealt, why, kings are rubbish compared to you. But for the consolations of the mind, the proper care of the body, the agreeable things of life, if one may say so — ah, Monsieur, don't talk to me about men of genius; they are their own executioners."

"Good, Planchet!" said D'Artagnan, quite fidgety with curiosity; "upon my word, you interest me in the highest degree."

"You feel already less bored than you did just now, do you not?"

"I was not bored; yet since you have been talking to me I feel more amused."

"Very good, then; that is not a bad beginning. I will cure you, rely upon that."

"I ask nothing better."

"Will you let me try, then?"

"Immediately, if you like."

"Very well. Have you any horses here?"

"Yes; ten, twenty, thirty."

"Oh, there is no occasion for so many as that; two will be quite sufficient."

"They are at your disposal, Planchet."

"Very good; then I shall carry you off with me."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

"Where?"

"Ah! you are asking me too much."

"You will admit, however, that it is important that I should know where I am going."

"Do you like the country?"

"Only moderately, Planchet."

"Then you like the town better?"

"That is as it may be."

"Well, I am going to take you to a place half town and half country."

"Good."

"To a place where I am sure you will amuse yourself."

"Admirable!"

"Yes; and more wonderful still, to a place from which you have just returned, for the purpose only, it would seem, of getting bored here."

"It is to Fontainebleau you are going, then?"

"Exactly; to Fontainebleau."

"And, in Heaven's name, what are you going to do at Fontainebleau?"

Planchet answered D'Artagnan by a wink full of sly humor.

"You have some property there, you rascal!"

"Oh, a very paltry affair; a little bit of a house,—nothing more!"

"I understand you."

"But it is tolerable enough, I give you my word for it."

"I am going to Planchet's country-seat!" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Whenever you like."

"Did we not say to-morrow?"

"To-morrow, if you like; and then, besides, to-morrow is the 14th, — that is to say, the day before the one when I am afraid of getting bored; so we will look upon it as an understood thing."

"Agreed."

"You will lend me one of your horses?"

"The best I have."

"No; I prefer the gentlest. I never was a very good rider, as you know, and in my grocery business I have got more awkward than ever; besides — "

"Besides what?"

"Why," added Planchet, with another wink, "I do not wish to fatigue myself."

"Why so?" D'Artagnan ventured to ask.

"Because I should lose half the pleasure I expect to enjoy," replied Planchet; and thereupon he rose from his sack of Indian corn, stretching himself, and making all his bones crack, one after the other, with a sort of harmony.

"Planchet, Planchet," exclaimed D'Artagnan, "I do declare that there is no sybarite, upon the whole face of the globe, who can be compared to you. Ah, Planchet, it is very clear that we have never yet eaten a ton of salt together."

"Why so, Monsieur?"

"Because even now I can scarcely say I know you," said D'Artagnan, "and because, in point of fact, I return to the opinion which for a moment I had formed of you

on that day at Boulogne when you strangled, or nearly strangled, M. de Wardes's valet, Lubin, — in plain language, Planchet, that you are a man of great resources."

Planchet began to laugh with a laugh full of self-conceit; bade the musketeer good-night, and went downstairs to his back shop which he used as a bedroom. D'Artagnan resumed his original position upon his chair; and his brow, which had been unruffled for a moment, became more thoughtful than ever. He had already forgotten the whims and fancies of Planchet. "Yes," said he, taking up again the thread of his thoughts, which had been broken by the agreeable conversation in which we have just permitted our readers to participate, — "Yes, yes, those three points include everything: First, to ascertain what Baisemeaux wanted with Aramis; secondly, to learn why Aramis does not let me hear from him; and thirdly, to ascertain where Porthos is. The whole mystery lies in these three points. Since, therefore," continued D'Artagnan, "our friends tell us nothing, we must have recourse to our own poor intelligence. I must do what I can, *mordioux!* or rather *Malaga!* as Planchet says."

CHAPTER IX.

A LETTER FROM M. DE BAISEMEAUX.

D'ARTAGNAN, faithful to his plan, went the very next morning to pay a visit to M. de Baisemeaux. It was cleaning day at the Bastille; the cannon were furbished up, the staircases scraped and cleaned; and the jailers seemed to be carefully engaged in polishing even the keys themselves. As for the soldiers belonging to the garrison, they were walking about in the different courtyards, under the pretence that they were clean enough.

The governor, Baisemeaux, received D'Artagnan with more than ordinary politeness, but he behaved towards him with so marked a reserve of manner that all D'Artagnan's tact and cleverness could not get a syllable out of him. The more he kept himself within bounds, the more D'Artagnan's suspicion increased. The latter even fancied that he noticed that the governor was acting under the influence of a recent recommendation. Baisemeaux had not been at the Palais-Royal with D'Artagnan the same cold and impenetrable man which the latter now found in the Baisemeaux of the Bastille. When D'Artagnan wished to make him talk about the urgent money matters which had brought Baisemeaux in search of Aramis, and had rendered him expansive, notwithstanding what had passed on that evening, Baisemeaux pretended that he had some orders to give in the prison, and left D'Artagnan so long alone, waiting for him, that our musketeer, feeling sure that he should not get another syllable out of him, left

the Bastille without waiting until Baisemeaux returned from his inspection.

But D'Artagnan's suspicions were aroused; and when once that was the case, D'Artagnan could not sleep or remain quiet for a moment. He was among men what the cat is among quadrupeds, the emblem of restlessness and impatience at the same moment. A restless cat no more remains in the same place than a silk thread does which is wafted idly to and fro with every breath of air. A cat on the watch is as motionless as death, fixed at its place of observation, and neither hunger nor thirst can draw it away from its meditation. D'Artagnan, who was burning with impatience, suddenly threw aside the feeling, like a cloak which he felt too heavy on his shoulders, and said to himself that what they were concealing from him was the very thing it was important that he should know; and consequently he reasoned that Baisemeaux would not fail to put Aramis on his guard, if Aramis had given him any particular recommendation, — which was, in fact, the very thing that happened.

Baisemeaux had hardly had time to return from the donjon, when D'Artagnan placed himself in ambuscade close to the Rue du Petit-Muse, so as to see every one who might leave the gates of the Bastille. After he had spent an hour on the look-out from the Golden Portcullis, under the pent-house of which he could keep himself somewhat in the shade, D'Artagnan observed a soldier leave the Bastille. This was, indeed, the surest indication he could possibly have wished for, as every jailer or warder has certain days, and even certain hours, for leaving the Bastille, since all are alike prohibited from having either wives or lodgings in the castle, and can accordingly leave without exciting any curiosity; but a soldier once in barracks is kept there for four-and-twenty hours when

on duty, — and no one knew this better than D'Artagnan. The soldier in question, therefore, was not likely to leave in his regimentals, except on an express and urgent order. The soldier, we were saying, left the Bastille at a slow and lounging pace, like a happy mortal, in fact, who instead of sentry duty before a wearisome guard-house or upon a bastion no less wearisome has the good luck to get a little liberty in addition to a walk, — the two pleasures being reckoned as part of his time on duty. He bent his steps towards the Faubourg St. Antoine, enjoying the fresh air and the warmth of the sun, and looking at all the pretty faces he passed. D'Artagnan followed him at a distance; he had not yet arranged his ideas as to what was to be done. "I must, first of all," he thought, "see the fellow's face. A man seen is a man judged of." D'Artagnan increased his pace, and, which was not very difficult, soon got in advance of the soldier. Not only did he observe that his face showed a tolerable amount of intelligence and resolution, but he noticed also that his nose was a little red. "The fellow has a weakness for brandy, I see," said D'Artagnan to himself. At the same moment that he remarked his red nose, he saw that the soldier had a white paper in his belt.

"Good! he has a letter," added D'Artagnan. The only difficulty was to get hold of the letter. A soldier would of course be too delighted at having been selected by M. de Baisemeaux as a special messenger, and would not be likely to sell his message. As D'Artagnan was biting his nails, the soldier continued to advance farther and farther into the Faubourg St. Antoine. "He is certainly going to St. Mandé," he said to himself, "and I shall not be able to learn what the letter contains." It was enough to drive him wild. "If I were in uniform," said D'Artagnan to himself, "I would have the fellow seized and his letter

with him. I could easily get assistance at the very first guard-house; but the devil take me if I mention my name in an affair of this kind! If I were to treat him to something to drink, his suspicions would be roused; and besides he would make me drunk. *Mordioux!* my wits seem to have left me," said D'Artagnan; "it is all over with me. Yet, supposing I were to attack this poor devil, make him draw his sword, and kill him for the sake of his letter! No harm in that, if it were a question of a letter from a queen to a nobleman, or a letter from a cardinal to a queen; but what miserable intrigues are those of Messieurs Aramis and Fouquet with M. Colbert! A man's life for that! Oh, no, indeed; not even ten crowns."

As D'Artagnan philosophized in this manner, biting first his nails and then his mustaches, he perceived a group of archers and a commissary of police engaged in forcibly carrying away a man of very gentlemanly exterior, who was struggling with all his might against them. The archers had torn his clothes, and were dragging him roughly away. He begged that they would lead him along more respectfully, asserting that he was a gentleman and a soldier; and observing our soldier walking in the street, he called out, "Help, comrade!"

The soldier walked on with the same step towards the man who had called out to him, followed by the crowd. An idea suddenly occurred to D'Artagnan; it was his first one, and we shall find that it was not a bad one, either. During the time the gentleman was relating to the soldier that he had just been seized in a house as a thief, when the truth was he was only there as a lover; and while the soldier was pitying him, and offering him consolation and advice with that gravity which a French soldier has always ready whenever his vanity or his *esprit de corps* is con-

cerned, — D'Artagnan glided behind the soldier, who was closely hemmed in by the crowd, and quickly and deftly drew the paper out of his belt. As at this moment the gentleman with the torn clothes was pulling about the soldier to show how the commissary of police had pulled him about, D'Artagnan effected his capture of the letter without the slightest inconvenience. He stationed himself about ten paces distant, behind the pillar of an adjoining house, and read the address, "To M. du Vallon, at M. Fouquet's, St. Mandé."

"Good!" he said; and then he unsealed without tearing the letter, drew out the paper, which was folded in four, and which contained only these words: —

DEAR M. DU VALLON, — Will you be good enough to tell M. d'Herblay that *he* has been to the Bastille, and has been asking questions?

Your devoted DE BAISEMEAUX.

"Very good! all right!" exclaimed D'Artagnan; "it is clear enough now. Porthos is engaged in it." Being now satisfied of what he wished to know: "*Mordioux!*" thought the musketeer, "there is that poor devil of a soldier, whom that hot-headed, cunning fellow, De Baisemeaux, will make to pay dearly for my trick. If he returns without the letter, what will they do to him? Besides, I don't want the letter; when the egg has been sucked, what is the good of the shell?" D'Artagnan perceived that the commissary and the archers had succeeded in convincing the soldier, and had gone on their way with the prisoner, the latter being still surrounded by the crowd and continuing his complaints. D'Artagnan advanced into the very middle of the crowd, let the letter fall, without any one having observed him, and then retreated rapidly. The soldier resumed his route towards

St. Mandé, his mind much occupied with the gentleman who had implored his protection. Suddenly he thought of his letter, and looking at his belt saw that it was no longer there. D'Artagnan derived no little satisfaction from his sudden terrified cry. The poor soldier in the greatest anguish of mind looked round him on every side, and at last, about twenty paces behind him, perceived the blessed envelope. He pounced on it like a falcon on its prey. The envelope was certainly a little dusty and rather crumpled, but at all events the letter was found again. D'Artagnan observed that the broken seal puzzled the soldier a good deal; but he apparently satisfied himself, and returned the letter to his belt. "Go on," said D'Artagnan, "I have plenty of time before me, so you may precede me. It appears that Aramis is not at Paris, since Baisemeaux writes to Porthos. Dear Porthos, how delighted I shall be to see him again, and to have some conversation with him!" said the Gascon; and regulating his pace according to that of the soldier, he promised himself to arrive a quarter of an hour after him at M. Fouquet's.

CHAPTER X.

IN WHICH THE READER WILL BE DELIGHTED TO FIND THAT PORTHOS HAS LOST NOTHING OF HIS STRENGTH.

D'ARTAGNAN had, according to his usual style, calculated that every hour is worth sixty minutes, and every minute worth sixty seconds. Thanks to this perfectly exact calculation of minutes and seconds, he reached the superintendent's door at the very moment when the soldier was leaving it with his belt empty. D'Artagnan presented himself at the door, which a porter with a profusely embroidered livery held half open for him. D'Artagnan would very much have liked to enter without giving his name; but this was impossible, and so he gave it. Notwithstanding this concession, which ought to have removed every difficulty in the way, — at least D'Artagnan thought so, — the doorkeeper hesitated; however, at the second repetition of the title, captain of the king's Musketeers, the doorkeeper, without quite leaving the passage clear for him, ceased to bar it completely. D'Artagnan understood that orders of the most positive character had been given. He decided, therefore, to tell a falsehood, — a circumstance, moreover, which did not very seriously affect his peace of mind, when he saw that beyond the falsehood the safety of the State itself, or even purely and simply his own individual personal interest, might be at stake. He therefore added to the statements which he had already made, that the soldier who had just brought a letter to M. du Vallon was his own messenger, and that the only object of that letter was to announce his intended arrival.

From that moment no one opposed D'Artagnan's entrance any further, and he entered accordingly. A valet wished to accompany him; but he answered that it was useless to take that trouble on his account, inasmuch as he knew perfectly well where M. du Vallon was. There was nothing, of course, to say to a man so thoroughly and completely informed, and D'Artagnan was permitted to do as he liked. The terraces, the magnificent apartments, the gardens, were all reviewed and narrowly inspected by the musketeer. He walked for a quarter of an hour in this more than royal residence, which included as many wonders as articles of furniture, and as many servants as there were columns and doors. "Decidedly," he said to himself, "this mansion has no other limits than the limits of the earth. Is it probable that Porthos has taken it into his head to go back to Pierrefonds without even leaving M. Fouquet's house?" He finally reached a remote part of the château, enclosed by a stone wall upon which climbed a profusion of thick plants, luxuriant in blossoms as large and solid as fruit. At equal distances on the top of this enclosing wall were placed various statues in timid or mysterious attitudes. These were vestals hidden beneath the long Greek peplum, with its thick, heavy folds; agile watchers, covered with their marble veils, and guarding the palace with their furtive glances. A statue of Hermes, with his finger on his lips; one of Iris, with extended wings; another of Night, sprinkled all over with poppies, — ruled over the gardens and the outbuildings, which could be seen through the trees. All these statues threw in white relief their profiles upon the dark ground of the tall cypresses, which shot up their black summits toward the sky. Around these cypresses were entwined climbing roses, whose flowering rings were fastened to every fork of the branches, and spread over the lower

boughs and upon the various statues showers of petals of the richest fragrance.

These enchantments seemed to the musketeer the result of the greatest efforts of the human mind. He felt in a dreamy, almost poetical frame of mind. The idea that Porthos was living in so perfect an Eden gave him a higher idea of Porthos, — showing how true it is that even the very highest orders of minds are not quite exempt from the influence of surrounding circumstances. D'Artagnan found the door, and at the door a kind of spring which he detected; having touched it, the door flew open. D'Artagnan entered, closed the door behind him, and advanced into a pavilion built in a circular form, in which no other sound could be heard but cascades and the songs of birds. At the door of the pavilion he met a lackey.

"It is here, I believe," said D'Artagnan, without hesitation, "that M. le Baron du Vallon is staying?"

"Yes, Monsieur," answered the lackey.

"Have the goodness to tell him that M. le Chevalier d'Artagnan, captain of his Majesty's Musketeers, is waiting to see him."

D'Artagnan was introduced into a parlor, and had not long to remain in expectation. A well-remembered step shook the floor of the adjoining room; a door opened, or rather flew open, and Porthos appeared, and threw himself into his friend's arms with a sort of embarrassment which did not ill become him. "You here?" he exclaimed.

"And you?" replied D'Artagnan. "Ah, you sly fellow!"

"Yes," said Porthos, with a somewhat embarrassed smile; "yes, you see I am staying in M. Fouquet's house, at which you are not a little surprised, I suppose?"

"Not at all; why should you not be one of M.

Fouquet's friends? M. Fouquet has a very large number of friends, particularly among clever men."

Porthos had the modesty not to take the compliment to himself. "Besides," he added, "you saw me at Belle-Isle."

"A greater reason for my believing you to be one of M. Fouquet's friends."

"The fact is, I am acquainted with him," said Porthos, with a certain embarrassment of manner.

"Ah, friend Porthos," said D'Artagnan, "how treacherously you have behaved towards me!"

"In what way?" exclaimed Porthos.

"What! you completed so admirable a work as the fortifications of Belle-Isle, and you did not tell me of it!" Porthos colored. "Nay, more than that," continued D'Artagnan, "you saw me out yonder, you know I am in the king's service, and yet you could not guess that the king, jealously desirous of learning the name of the man whose abilities have wrought a work of which he has heard the most wonderful accounts, — you could not guess, I say, that the king sent me to learn who this man was."

"What! the king sent you to learn —"

"Of course; but don't let us speak of that any more."

"*Corne de bœuf!*" said Porthos; "on the contrary, we will speak of it; and so the king knew that we were fortifying Belle-Isle?"

"Of course; does not the king know everything?"

"But he did not know who was fortifying it."

"No; he only suspected, from what he had been told of the nature of the works, that it was some celebrated soldier."

"The devil!" said Porthos, "if I had only known that!"

"You would not have run away from Vannes as you did, perhaps?"

"No; what did you say when you could n't find me?"

"My dear fellow, I reflected."

"Ah, indeed, you reflected, did you? Well, and to what did that reflection lead?"

"It led me to guess the whole truth."

"Come, then, tell me, what did you guess, after all?" said Porthos, settling himself into an arm-chair and assuming the airs of a sphinx.

"I guessed, in the first place, that you were fortifying Belle-Isle."

"There was no great difficulty in that, for you saw me at work."

"Wait a minute; I also guessed something else, — that you were fortifying Belle-Isle by M. Fouquet's orders."

"That 's true."

"But that is not all. Whenever I feel myself in a mood for guessing, I do not stop half-way; and so I guessed that M. Fouquet wished to preserve the most absolute secrecy respecting these fortifications."

"I believe that was his intention, in fact," said Porthos.

"Yes; but do you know why he wished to keep it secret?"

"Why, in order that it should not be known," said Porthos.

"That was his principal reason. But his wish was subservient to an act of generosity —"

"In fact," said Porthos, "I have heard it said that M. Fouquet was a very generous man."

"— to an act of generosity which he wished to exhibit towards the king."

"Oh, oh!"

"You seem surprised at it?"

"Yes."

"And you did not know that?"

"No."

"Well, I know it, then."

"You're a wizard."

"Not in the slightest degree."

"How do you know it, then?"

"By a very simple means. I heard M. Fouquet himself say so to the king."

"Say what to the king?"

"That he had fortified Belle-Isle on his Majesty's account, and that he made him a present of Belle-Isle."

"And you heard M. Fouquet say that to the king?"

"In those very words. He even added, 'Belle-Isle has been fortified by an engineer, one of my friends, a man of a great deal of merit, whom I shall ask your Majesty's permission to present to you.' 'What is his name?' asked the king. 'The Baron du Vallon,' M. Fouquet replied. 'Very well,' returned his Majesty, 'you will present him to me.'"

"The king said that?"

"Upon the word of a D'Artagnan!"

"Oh!" said Porthos. "Why have I not been presented, then?"

"Have they not, then, spoken to you about this presentation?"

"Yes, certainly; but I am always kept waiting for it."

"Be easy! it will be sure to come."

"Humph! humph!" grumbled Porthos.

D'Artagnan pretended not to hear this; and changing the conversation, he said, "You seem to be living in a very solitary place here, my dear fellow?"

"I always preferred retirement; I am of a melancholy disposition," replied Porthos, with a sigh.

"Really, that is odd," said D'Artagnan; "I never remarked that in you."

"It is only since I have taken to study," said Porthos, with a thoughtful air.

"But the labors of the mind have not affected the health of the body, I trust?"

"Oh, not at all!"

"Your strength is as great as ever?"

"Too great, my friend, too great."

"Ah! I had heard that for a short time after your arrival —"

"That I could hardly move a limb, I suppose?"

"How was it?" said D'Artagnan, smiling; "and why was it you could not move?"

Porthos perceived that he had made a mistake, and wished to correct it. "Yes, I came from Belle-Isle here upon very hard horses," he said; "and that fatigued me."

"I am no longer astonished, then, since I, who followed you, found seven or eight lying dead on the road."

"I am very heavy, you know," said Porthos.

"So that you were bruised all over."

"My fat melted, and that made me very ill."

"Poor Porthos! But how did Aramis act towards you under those circumstances?"

"Very well indeed. He had me attended to by M. Fouquet's own doctor. But just imagine, at the end of a week I could not breathe any longer."

"What do you mean?"

"The room was too small; I absorbed too much air."

"Indeed?"

"I was told so, at least; and so I was removed into another apartment."

"Where you were able to breathe, I hope."

"Yes, more freely; but I had no exercise, — nothing to do. The doctor insisted that I was not to stir; I, on the contrary, felt that I was stronger than ever. That was the cause of a very serious accident."

"What accident?"

"Fancy, my dear fellow, that I revolted against the directions of that ass of a doctor, and I resolved to go out, whether it suited him or not; and consequently I told the valet who waited on me to bring me my clothes."

"You were quite naked, then, my dear Porthos?"

"Oh, no! on the contrary, I had a magnificent dressing-gown to wear. The lackey obeyed. I dressed myself in my own clothes, which had become too large for me; but, what was very strange, my feet had become too large."

"Yes, I quite understand."

"And my boots had become too small."

"You mean your feet were still swollen."

"Exactly; you have hit it."

"*Parbleu!* And is that the accident you were going to tell me about?"

"Oh, yes! I did not come to the same conclusion that you have reached. I said to myself, 'Since my feet have entered my boots ten times, there is no reason why they should not go in the eleventh.'"

"Allow me to tell you, my dear Porthos, that on this occasion you failed in your logic."

"In short, then, I happened to be sitting opposite a partition. I tried to get my right boot on; I pulled it with my hands, I pushed with all the strength of the muscles of my leg, making the most unheard-of efforts, when suddenly the two tags of my boot remained in my hands, and my foot struck out like a catapult."

"Catapult! how learned you are in fortifications, dear Porthos!"

"My foot darted out like a catapult, and came against the partition, which gave way. My friend, I really thought that, like Samson, I had demolished the temple; the number of pictures, the quantity of china, vases of flowers, tapestries, and window-poles which fell down was really wonderful."

"Indeed!"

"Without reckoning that on the other side of a partition was a set of shelves laden with china —"

"Which you knocked over?"

"Which I dashed to the other side of the room," said Porthos, laughing.

"Upon my word it is, as you say, astonishing," replied D'Artagnan, beginning to laugh also; whereupon Porthos laughed louder than ever.

"I broke," said Porthos, in a voice half choked from his increasing mirth, "more than three thousand livres worth of china — ha! ha! ha!"

"Good!" said D'Artagnan.

"I smashed more than four thousand livres worth of glass — ha! ha! ha!"

"Excellent!"

"Without counting a lustre, which fell on my head and was broken into a thousand pieces — ha! ha! ha!"

"Upon your head?" said D'Artagnan, holding his sides.

"Right on the top."

"But your head must have been broken?"

"No, since I tell you, on the contrary, my dear fellow, that it was the lustre which was broken like glass, as it was, indeed."

"Ah! the lustre was glass, you say."

"Venetian glass! a perfect curiosity, quite matchless indeed, and it weighed two hundred pounds."

"And it fell upon your head!"

"Upon — my — head. Just imagine a globe of crystal, gilded all over, the lower part beautifully encrusted, perfumes burning at the top, and jets from which flame issued when they were lighted!"

"I quite understand; but they were not lighted at the time?"

"Happily not, or I should have been set on fire."

"And you were only knocked flat?"

"Not at all."

"How, not at all?"

"Why, the lustre fell on my skull. It appears that we have upon the top of our heads an exceedingly thick crust."

"Who told you that, Porthos?"

"The doctor. A sort of dome which would bear Notre Dame, at Paris."

"Bah!"

"Yes, it seems that our skulls are made in that manner."

"Speak for yourself, my dear fellow! it is your own skull that is made in that manner, and not the skulls of other people."

"Well, that may be so," said Porthos, conceitedly; "so true was it in my case, at least, that no sooner did the lustre fall upon the dome which we have at the top of our heads, than there was a report like a cannon, the crystal was broken to pieces, and I fell, covered from head to foot."

"With blood, poor Porthos!"

"Not at all; with perfumes, which smelt like rich creams. It was delicious; but the odor was too strong, and

I felt quite giddy from it. Perhaps you have experienced it sometimes yourself, D'Artagnan?"

"Yes, in inhaling the scent of the lily of the valley; so that, my poor friend, you were knocked over by the shock and overpowered by the odor?"

"Yes; but what is very remarkable, — for the doctor told me, upon my word, that he had never seen anything like it —"

"You had a bump on your head, at least?" interrupted D'Artagnan.

"I had five."

"Why five?"

"I will tell you; the lustre had, at its lower extremity, five gilt ornaments, extremely sharp."

"Oh!"

"Well, these five ornaments penetrated my hair, which, as you see, I wear very thick."

"Fortunately so."

"And they made a mark on my skin. But just notice the singularity of it, — these things seem really only to happen to me! — instead of making indentations, they made bumps! The doctor could never succeed in explaining that to me satisfactorily."

"Well, then, I will explain it to you."

"You will do me a great service if you will," said Porthos, winking his eyes, which with him was a sign of the profoundest attention.

"Since you have been employing your brain in studies of an exalted character, in important calculations, and so on, the head has gained a certain advantage, so that your head is now too full of science."

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it. The result is that instead of allowing any foreign matter to penetrate the interior of the

head, your bony box or skull, which is already too full, avails itself of the openings which are made in it to allow this excess to escape."

"Ah!" said Porthos, to whom this explanation appeared clearer than that of the doctor.

"The five protuberances caused by the five ornaments of the lustre must certainly have been scientific masses, brought to the surface by the force of circumstances."

"In fact," said Porthos, "the real truth is that I felt far worse outside my head than inside. I will even confess that when I put my hat upon my head, clapping it on with that graceful energy which we gentlemen of the sword possess, if my hand was not very gently applied, I experienced the most painful sensations."

"I quite believe you, Porthos."

"Therefore, my good friend," said the giant, "M. Fouquet decided, seeing how slightly built the house was, to give me another lodging; and so they brought me here."

"It is the private park, is it not?"

"Yes."

"Where the rendezvous are made, — that park, indeed, which is so celebrated in some of those mysterious stories about the superintendent."

"I don't know. I have had no rendezvous or mysterious stories here myself; but they have authorised me to exercise my muscles, and I take advantage of the permission by rooting up some of the trees."

"What for?"

"To keep my hand in, and also to get some bird's-nests; I find that more convenient than climbing up the trees."

"You are as pastoral as Tyrcis, my dear Porthos."

"Yes, I like the small eggs; I like them very much

better than larger ones. You have no idea how delicate an omelet is, if made of four or five hundred eggs of linnets, chaffinches, starlings, blackbirds, and thrushes."

"But five hundred eggs is perfectly monstrous!"

"A salad-bowl will hold them easily enough," said Porthos.

D'Artagnan looked at Porthos admiringly for full five minutes, as if he had seen him for the first time, while Porthos proudly expanded beneath his friend's gaze. They remained in this state several minutes, Porthos smiling, and D'Artagnan looking at him. D'Artagnan was evidently seeking to give the conversation a new turn. "Do you amuse yourself much here, Porthos?" he asked at last, very likely after he had found out what he was searching for.

"Not always."

"I can imagine that; but when you get thoroughly bored, by and by, what do you intend to do?"

"Oh! I shall not be here for any length of time. Aramis is waiting until the last bump on my head disappears, in order to present me to the king, who I am told cannot endure the sight of a bump."

"Aramis is still in Paris, then?"

"No."

"Whereabouts is he, then?"

"At Fontainebleau."

"Alone?"

"With M. Fouquet."

"Very good. But do you happen to know one thing?"

"No; tell it me, and then I shall know."

"Well, then, I think that Aramis is forgetting you."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes; for at Fontainebleau yonder, you must know, they are laughing, dancing, banqueting, and drawing the

corks of M. de Mazarin's wine in fine style. Are you aware that they have a ballet there every evening?"

"The deuce they have!"

"I declare that your dear Aramis is forgetting you."

"Well, that is not at all unlikely, and I have myself thought so sometimes."

"Unless he is playing you a trick, the sly fellow!"

"Oh!"

"You know that Aramis is as sly as a fox."

"Yes, but to play me a trick —"

"Listen; in the first place, he puts you under a sort of sequestration."

"He sequesters me! Do you mean to say I am sequestered?"

"I think so."

"I wish you would have the goodness to prove that to me."

"Nothing easier. Do you ever go out?"

"Never."

"Do you ever ride on horseback?"

"Never."

"Are your friends allowed to come and see you?"

"Never."

"Very well, then, my friend; never to go out, never to ride on horseback, never to see your friends, — that is called being sequestered."

"But why should Aramis sequester me?" inquired Porthos.

"Come," said D'Artagnan, "be frank, Porthos!"

"As gold."

"It was Aramis who drew the plan of the fortifications at Belle-Isle, was it not?"

Porthos colored as he said, "Yes; but that was all that he did."

"Exactly; and my own opinion is that it was no very great affair, after all."

"That is mine too."

"Very good; I am delighted that we are of the same opinion."

"He never even came to Belle-Isle," said Porthos.

"There now, you see!"

"It was I who went to Vannes, as you may have seen."

"Say, rather, as I did see. Well, that is precisely the state of the case, my dear Porthos. Aramis, who only drew the plans, wishes to pass himself off as the engineer, while you, who stone by stone built the wall, the citadel, and the bastions, he wishes to reduce to the rank of a mere builder."

"By builder you mean mason, perhaps?"

"Mason; the very word."

"Plasterer, in fact?"

"Precisely."

"A laborer?"

"Exactly."

"Oh, my dear Aramis, you seem to think you are only five-and-twenty years of age still!"

"Yes; and that is not all, for he believes you are fifty."

"I should have liked amazingly to see him at work."

"Yes, indeed."

"A fellow who has got the gout!"

"Yes."

"The gravel!"

"Yes."

"Who has lost three of his teeth!"

"Four."

"While I — look at mine!" and Porthos, opening his large mouth very wide, displayed two rows of teeth rather

less white than snow, but as even, hard, and sound as ivory.

"You can hardly believe, Porthos," said D'Artagnan, "what a fancy the king has for good teeth. Yours decide me; I will present you to the king myself."

"You?"

"Why not? Do you think I have less credit at court than Aramis?"

"Oh, no!"

"Do you think that I have the slightest pretensions in regard to the fortifications at Belle-Isle?"

"Oh, certainly not!"

"It is your own interest alone, which would induce me to do it."

"I don't doubt it in the least."

"Well, I am the intimate friend of the king; and a proof of that is that whenever there is anything disagreeable to tell him, it is I who have to do it."

"But, dear friend, if you present me—"

"Well!"

"Aramis will be angry."

"With me?"

"No, with me."

"Bah! whether it be he or I who presents you, since you are to be presented, what does it matter?"

"They were going to get me some clothes made."

"Your own are splendid."

"Oh, those I had ordered were far more beautiful!"

"Take care; the king likes simplicity."

"In that case I will be simple. But what will M. Fouquet say, when he learns that I have left?"

"Are you a prisoner, then, on parole?"

"No, not quite that; but I promised him that I would not leave without letting him know."

"Wait a minute; we shall return to that presently. Have you anything to do here?"

"I? nothing; nothing of any importance, at least."

"Unless, indeed, you are Aramis's representative for something of importance."

"By no means."

"What I tell you, pray understand that, is out of interest for you. I suppose, for instance, that you are commissioned to send Aramis messages and letters."

"Ah! letters — yes, I send certain letters to him."

"Where?"

"To Fontainebleau."

"Have you any letters, then?"

"But —"

"Nay, let me speak. Have you any letters, I say?"

"I have just received one for him."

"Interesting?"

"I suppose so."

"You do not read them, then?"

"I am not at all curious," said Porthos; and he drew out of his pocket the soldier's letter, which Porthos had not read, but which D'Artagnan had.

"Do you know what to do with it?" said D'Artagnan.

"Of course; do as I always do, — send it to him."

"Not so."

"Why not? Keep it, then?"

"No, not quite that. Did they not tell you that this letter was important?"

"Very important."

"Well, you must take it yourself to Fontainebleau."

"To Aramis?"

"Yes."

"Very good."

"And since the king is there —"

"You will profit by that."

"I shall profit by the opportunity to present you to the king."

"Ah, *corne de bœuf!* D'Artagnan, there is no one like you to find expedients."

"Therefore, instead of forwarding to our friend any messages, which may or may not be faithfully delivered, we will ourselves be the bearers of the letter."

"I had never even thought of that, and yet it is simple enough."

"And therefore, because it is urgent, Porthos, we ought to set off at once."

"In fact," said Porthos, "the sooner we set off, the less chance there is of Aramis's letter meeting with any delay."

"Porthos, your reasoning is always forcible, and in your case logic seems to serve as an auxiliary to the imagination."

"Do you think so?" said Porthos.

"It is the result of your hard reading," replied D'Artagnan. "So come along; let us be off!"

"But," said Porthos, "my promise to M. Fouquet?"

"Which?"

"Not to leave St. Mandé without telling him of it."

"Ah, my dear Porthos," said D'Artagnan, "how very young you are!"

"In what way?"

"You are going to Fontainebleau, are you not, where you will find M. Fouquet?"

"Yes."

"Probably in the king's palace."

"'In the king's palace,'" repeated Porthos, with an air full of majesty.

"Well, you will accost him with these words, 'M. Fou-

quet, I have the honor to inform you that I have just left St. Mandé.'"

"And," said Porthos, with the same majestic mien, "seeing me at Fontainebleau at the king's, M. Fouquet will not be able to tell me that I am not speaking the truth."

"My dear Porthos, I was just on the point of opening my lips to make the same remark, but you anticipate me in everything. Oh, Porthos, how fortunately you are gifted! Age has not made any impression on you."

"Not over-much."

"Then there is nothing more to say?"

"I think not."

"All your scruples are removed?"

"Quite so."

"In that case I shall carry you off with me."

"Exactly; and I shall go and get my horses saddled."

"You have horses here, then?"

"I have five."

"You had them sent from Pierrefonds, I suppose?"

"No, M. Fouquet gave them to me."

"My dear Porthos, we shall not want five horses for two persons; besides, I have already three in Paris, which will make eight, and that will be too many."

"It would not be too many if I had my servants here; but, alas! they are not here."

"Do you miss them, then?"

"I miss Mousqueton; I need Mousqueton."

"What a good-hearted fellow you are, Porthos!" said D'Artagnan; "but the best thing you can do is to leave your horses here, as you have left Mousqueton out yonder."

"Why so?"

"Because, by and by, it might turn out a very good thing if M. Fouquet had never given you anything at all."

"I don't understand you," said Porthos.

"It is not necessary that you should understand."

"But yet — "

"I will explain to you later, Porthos."

"I 'll wager it is some piece of policy or other."

"Of the most subtle character," returned D'Artagnan.

Porthos bent his head at this word "policy;" then, after a moment's reflection, he added, "I confess, D'Artagnan, that I am no politician."

"I know that well."

"Oh, every one knows that! You have said it to me yourself, — you the bravest of the brave."

"What did I say to you, Porthos?"

"That every man has his days. You told me so, and I have experienced it myself. There are certain days when one feels less pleasure than on others in exposing one's self to sword-thrusts."

"Exactly my own idea."

"And mine, too, although I can hardly believe in blows or thrusts which kill outright."

"The deuce! yet you have killed a few in your time."

"Yes; but I have never been killed."

"Your reason is a very good one."

"Therefore I do not believe that I shall ever die from a sword-thrust or a gun-shot."

"In that case, then, you are afraid of nothing. Ah! of water perhaps?"

"Oh! I swim like an otter."

"Of a quartan fever, then?"

"I never had one yet, and I don't believe I ever shall; but there is one thing I will admit;" and Porthos lowered his voice.

"What is that?" asked D'Artagnan, adopting the same tone which Porthos had used.

"I must confess," repeated Porthos, "that I am horribly afraid of political matters."

"Oh, bah!" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Upon my word, it 's true," said Porthos, in a stentorian voice. "I have seen his Eminence M. le Cardinal de Richelieu and his Eminence M. le Cardinal de Mazarin; the one was a red politician, the other a black politician. I have never felt very much more satisfied with the one than with the other. The first struck off the heads of M. de Marillac, M. de Thou, M. de Cinq-Mars, M. de Chalais, M. de Boutteville, and M. de Montmorency; the second got a whole crowd of Frondeurs cut in pieces, — and we belonged to them, my dear fellow."

"On the contrary, we did not belong to them," said D'Artagnan.

"Oh, indeed, yes; for if I unsheathed my sword for the cardinal, I struck for the king."

"Dear Porthos!"

"Well, I have done. My dread of politics is such that if there is any question of politics in the matter, I should much prefer to return to Pierrefonds."

"You would be quite right if that were the case; but with me, dear Porthos, there is no question of politics, that is quite clear. You have labored hard in fortifying Belle-Isle; the king wished to know the name of the clever engineer who had constructed the works. You are modest, as all men of true genius are. Perhaps Aramis wishes to put you under a bushel. But I happen to seize hold of you; I make it known who you are; I produce you; the king rewards you; and that is all the politics I have to do with."

"And all I will have to do with, either," said Porthos, holding out his hand to D'Artagnan.

But D'Artagnan knew Porthos's grasp; he knew that

once imprisoned within the baron's five fingers, no ordinary hand ever left it without being half crushed. He therefore held out to his friend, not his hand, but his fist; and Porthos did not even perceive the difference. Then they set off from St. Mandé. The servants talked a little with one another in an undertone, and whispered a few words which D'Artagnan understood, but which he took very good care not to let Porthos understand. "Our friend," he said to himself, "was really and truly Aramis's prisoner. Let us now see what will be the result of the liberation of this conspirator."

CHAPTER XI.

THE RAT AND THE CHEESE.

D'Artagnan and Porthos returned on foot, as D'Artagnan had come. When D'Artagnan, as he entered the shop of the Pilon d'Or, had announced to Planchet that M. du Vallon would be one of the privileged travellers, and when the plume in Porthos's hat had made the wooden candles which swung overhead rattle together, something almost like a melancholy presentiment troubled the delight which Planchet had promised himself for the next day. But the grocer's heart was of sterling metal, a precious relic of the good old time, — which is always for those who are getting old the time of their youth, and for those who are young the time of their ancestors. Planchet, notwithstanding the sort of inward shiver which he checked as soon as he experienced it, received Porthos, therefore, with a respect mingled with the most tender cordiality. Porthos, who was a little cold and stiff in his manners at first, on account of the social difference which existed at that period between a baron and a grocer, soon began to get a little softened when he perceived so much good-feeling and so many kind attentions in Planchet. He was particularly touched by the liberty which was permitted him, nay, even offered him, of plunging his large hands into the boxes of dried fruits and preserves, into the sacks of nuts and almonds, and into the drawers full of sweetmeats; so that, notwithstanding Planchet's pressing invitations to go upstairs to the *entresol*, he chose

as his favorite abiding-place, during the evening which he had to spend at Planchet's house, the shop itself, where his fingers could always find whatever his nose had first discovered for him. Delicious figs from Provence, filberts from the forest, and Tours plums were subjects of his uninterrupted attention for five consecutive hours. His teeth, like millstones, cracked the shells, which were scattered all over the floor, where they were trampled by every one who went in and out of the shop. Porthos pulled from the stalk with his lips, at one mouthful, bunches of the rich Muscatel raisins with their beautiful bloom, a half-pound of which thus passed at one gulp from his mouth to his stomach.

In a corner of the shop Planchet's assistants, crouching down in a fright, looked at one another without venturing to open their lips. They did not know who Porthos was, for they had never seen him before. The race of those Titans who had worn the cuirasses of Hugh Capet, Philip Augustus, and Francis I. had already begun to disappear. They asked themselves mentally if he might not possibly be the ogre of the fairy tale, who was going to turn the whole contents of Planchet's shop into his insatiable stomach, and that, too, without in the slightest degree displacing the barrels and boxes that were in it.

Munching, chewing, cracking, nibbling, sucking, and swallowing, Porthos occasionally said to the grocer, "You do a very good business here, friend Planchet."

"He will very soon have none at all to do, if this continues," grumbled the foreman, who had Planchet's word that he should be his successor; and in his despair he approached Porthos, who blocked up the whole of the passage leading from the back shop to the shop itself. He hoped that Porthos would rise, and that this movement would distract his devouring ideas.

"What do you want, my man?" asked Porthos, very affably.

"I should like to pass you, Monsieur, if it would not trouble you too much."

"Very well," said Porthos; "it will not trouble me in the least." At the same moment he took hold of the young fellow by the waistband, lifted him off the ground, and placed him very gently on the other side, smiling all the while with the same affable expression.

As soon as Porthos had placed him on the ground, the lad's legs so shook under him that he fell back upon some sacks of corks. But noticing the giant's gentleness of manner, he ventured again, and said, "Ah, Monsieur, pray be careful!"

"What about, my man?" inquired Porthos.

"You are positively putting fire into your body."

"How is that, my good fellow?" said Porthos.

"All those things are very heating to the system, Monsieur."

"Which?"

"Raisins, nuts, and almonds."

"Yes; but if raisins, nuts, and almonds are heating —"

"There is no doubt at all of it, Monsieur."

"— honey is very cooling," said Porthos, stretching out his hand towards a small keg of honey which was open; and he plunged into it the scoop with which the wants of the customers were supplied, and swallowed a good half-pound at one gulp.

"I must trouble you for some water now, my man," said Porthos.

"In a pail, Monsieur?" asked the lad, innocently.

"No, in a water-bottle; that will be quite enough," replied Porthos, good-humoredly; and raising the bottle to

his mouth, as a trumpeter does his trumpet, he emptied the bottle at a single draught.

Planchet was touched in all the sentiments which correspond to the fibres of ownership and self-love. However, a worthy representative of the hospitality which prevailed in early days, he feigned to be talking very earnestly with D'Artagnan, and incessantly repeated: "Ah, Monsieur, what a happiness! what an honor!"

"What time shall we have supper, Planchet?" inquired Porthos; "I feel hungry."

The foreman clasped his hands together. The two others got under the counters, fearing that Porthos might have a taste for human flesh.

"We shall take only a light luncheon here," said D'Artagnan; "and when we once get to Planchet's country-seat, we shall have supper."

"Ah! so we are going to your country-house, Planchet?" said Porthos; "so much the better!"

"You overwhelm me, Monsieur the Baron."

The "Monsieur the Baron" had a great effect upon the men, who detected a personage of the highest quality in an appetite of that kind. This title, too, reassured them. They had never heard that an ogre was ever called "Monsieur the Baron."

"I will take a few biscuits to eat on the road," said Porthos, carelessly; and so saying, he emptied a whole jar of aniseseed biscuits into the huge pocket of his doublet.

"My shop is saved!" exclaimed Planchet.

"Yes, as the cheese was," said the foreman.

"What cheese?"

"That Dutch cheese inside which a rat had made his way, and we found only the rind left."

Planchet looked all round his shop, and observing the different articles which had escaped Porthos's teeth, he

found the comparison somewhat exaggerated. The foreman, who perceived what was passing in his master's mind, said, "Take care! he has not gone yet."

"Have you any fruit here?" said Porthos, as he went upstairs to the *entresol*, where it had just been announced that some refreshment was prepared.

"Alas!" sighed the grocer, giving D'Artagnan a look full of entreaty, which the latter half understood.

As soon as they had finished eating, they set off. It was late when the three riders, who had left Paris about six in the evening, entered upon the paved street of Fontainebleau. The journey had passed very agreeably. Porthos took a fancy to Planchet's society, because the latter was very respectful in his manners and seemed delighted to talk to him about his meadows, his woods, and his rabbit-warrens. Porthos had all the taste and pride of a landed proprietor.

When D'Artagnan saw his two companions in earnest conversation, he took the opposite side of the road, and letting his bridle drop upon his horse's neck separated himself from the whole world, as he had done from Porthos and from Planchet. The moon shone softly through the dark foliage of the forest. The balmy odors of the open country rose to the horses' nostrils, and they snorted and pranced about with delight. Porthos and Planchet began to talk about hay-crops. Planchet admitted to Porthos that in the more advanced years of his life he had certainly neglected agricultural pursuits for commerce, but that his childhood had been passed in Picardy, in the beautiful meadows where the grass grew as high as the knees, and where he had played under the green apple-trees covered with red-cheeked fruit; he went on to say that he had solemnly promised himself that as soon as he should have made his fortune he would return to

Nature, and end his days as he had begun them, as near as he possibly could to the earth itself, where all men must go at last.

"Eh! eh!" said Porthos; "in that case, my dear M. Planchet, your retreat is not far distant."

"How so?"

"Why, you seem to be in the way of making your fortune very soon."

"Well, we are getting on pretty well, I must admit," replied Planchet.

"Come, tell me, what is the extent of your ambition, and what is the amount you intend to retire upon?"

"There is one circumstance, Monsieur," said Planchet, without answering the question, however interesting it may have been, "which occasions me a good deal of anxiety."

"What is it?" inquired Porthos, looking all round him as if in search of the circumstance that annoyed Planchet and desirous of freeing him from it.

"Why, formerly," said the grocer, "you used to call me Planchet, quite short, and you would have spoken to me then in a much more familiar manner than you do now."

"Certainly, certainly, I should have said so formerly," replied the good-natured Porthos, with an embarrassment full of delicacy; "but formerly —"

"Formerly I was M. d'Artagnan's lackey; is not that what you mean?"

"Yes."

"Well, if I am not quite his lackey, I am as much as ever his devoted servant; and more than that, since that time —"

"Well, Planchet?"

"Since that time I have had the honor of being in partnership with him."

"Oh!" said Porthos. "What! has D'Artagnan gone into the grocery business?"

"No, no," said D'Artagnan, whom these words had drawn out of his reverie, and who entered into the conversation with that readiness and quickness which distinguished every operation of his mind and body; "it was not D'Artagnan who entered into the grocery business, but Planchet who entered into a political affair with me."

"Yes," said Planchet, with mingled pride and satisfaction; "we transacted a little matter of business together which brought me in a hundred thousand livres, and M. D'Artagnan two hundred thousand."

"Oh!" said Porthos, with admiration.

"So that, Monsieur the Baron," continued the grocer, "I again beg you to be kind enough to call me Planchet, as you used to do; and to speak to me as familiarly as in old times. You cannot possibly imagine the pleasure that it would give me."

"If that be the case, my dear Planchet, I will do so, certainly," replied Porthos. And as he was quite close to Planchet, he raised his hand, as if to strike him on the shoulder, in token of friendly cordiality; but a providential movement of the horse made him miss his aim, so that his hand fell on the crupper of Planchet's horse instead, — which made the animal's legs almost give way.

D'Artagnan burst out laughing, as he said: "Take care, Planchet; for if Porthos begins to like you too much, he will caress you; and if he caresses you, he will knock you as flat as a pancake. Porthos is still very strong, you see."

"Oh," said Planchet, "Mousqueton is not dead, and yet Monsieur the Baron is very fond of him."

"Certainly," said Porthos, with a sigh which made all the three horses rear simultaneously; "and I was saying

only this very morning to D'Artagnan, how much I missed him. But tell me, Planchet?"

"Thank you, Monsieur the Baron, thank you."

"Good lad, good lad! How many acres of park have you?"

"Of park?"

"Yes; we will reckon up the meadows presently, and the woods afterwards."

"Whereabouts, Monsieur?"

"At your château."

"Oh, Monsieur the Baron, I have neither château, nor park, nor meadows, nor woods."

"What have you, then," inquired Porthos; "and why do you call it a country-seat?"

"I did not call it a country-seat, Monsieur the Baron," replied Planchet, somewhat humiliated, "but a simple country-box."

"Ah! I understand. You are modest."

"No, Monsieur the Baron; I speak the plain truth. I have rooms for a couple of friends; that is all."

"But, in that case, whereabouts do your friends walk?"

"In the first place, they can walk about the king's forest, which is very beautiful."

"Yes, I know the forest is very fine," said Porthos; "nearly as beautiful as my forest at Berri."

Planchet opened his eyes very wide. "Have you a forest of the same kind as the forest at Fontainebleau, Monsieur the Baron?" he stammered.

"Yes; I have two, indeed, but the one at Berri is my favorite."

"Why so?" asked Planchet, courteously.

"Because, in the first place, I don't know where it ends; and in the second place because it is full of poachers."

"And how can this abundance of poachers make the forest so agreeable to you?"

"Because they hunt my game, and I hunt them, — which in these peaceful times is for me a picture of war on a small scale."

They had reached this turn of the conversation, when Planchet looking up perceived the first houses of Fontainebleau, the outline of which stood out strongly against the sky, while, rising above the compact and irregularly formed mass of buildings, the pointed roofs of the château were clearly visible, the slates of which glistened beneath the light of the moon, like the scales of an immense fish. "Messieurs," said Planchet, "I have the honor to inform you that we have arrived at Fontainebleau."

CHAPTER XII.

PLANCHET'S COUNTRY-HOUSE.

THE cavaliers looked up, and saw that what the honest Planchet had announced to them was true. Ten minutes afterwards they were in the street called the Rue de Lyon, on the side opposite to the inn with the sign of the Beau-Paon. A high hedge of bushy elders, hawthorn, and wild hops formed a dark and impenetrable fence, behind which rose a white house with a large tiled roof. Two of the windows, which were quite dark, looked upon the street. Between the two a small door, with a porch supported by pillars, formed the entrance to the house. This door was gained by a step raised a little from the ground. Planchet got off his horse as if he intended to knock at the door; but on second thoughts, he took hold of his horse by the bridle, and led it about thirty paces farther on, his two companions following him. He then advanced about another thirty paces, until he arrived at the door of a cart-house, lighted by a grating; and lifting up a wooden latch, the only fastening, pushed open one of the folding-doors. He entered first, leading his horse after him by the bridle into a small courtyard, where an odor met them which revealed their close vicinity to a stable. "That smells all right," said Porthos loudly, getting off his horse; "and I almost begin to think that I am near my own cows at Pierrefonds."

"I have only one cow," Planchet hastened to say modestly.

"And I have thirty," said Porthos; "or, rather, I don't exactly know how many I have."

When the two cavaliers had entered, Planchet fastened the door behind them. In the mean time D'Artagnan, who had dismounted with his usual agility, inhaled the fresh perfumed air with the delight which a Parisian feels at the sight of green fields and fresh foliage, and plucked a piece of honeysuckle with one hand and of columbine with the other. Porthos had laid hold of some peas which were twined round poles stuck into the ground, and ate, or rather browsed upon them, pods and all; and Planchet was busily engaged in trying to wake up an old and infirm peasant, who was fast asleep in a shed, lying on a bed of moss covered with an old stable-coat. The peasant, recognizing Planchet, called him "the master," to the grocer's great satisfaction.

"Put the horses to the rack, old fellow, and give them good allowance," said Planchet.

"Yes, yes; fine animals they are too," said the peasant. "Oh, they shall have as much as they can eat!"

"Gently, gently, my man!" said D'Artagnan. "We are getting on a little too fast. A few oats and a truss of straw, — nothing more."

"Some bran and water for my mare," said Porthos; "for she is very warm, I think."

"Don't be afraid, Messieurs!" replied Planchet; "Daddy Célestin is an old gendarme who fought at Ivry. He knows all about stables; so come into the house." And he led the way along a well-sheltered walk, which crossed a kitchen-garden, then a small paddock, and came out into a little garden behind the house, the principal front of which, as we have already noticed, faced the street. As they approached they could see through two open windows on the ground floor, which led into a sitting-room,

the interior of Planchet's residence. This room, softly lighted by a lamp placed on the table, seemed, from the end of the garden, like a smiling picture of repose, comfort, and happiness. In every direction in which the rays of light fell, whether upon a piece of old china, or upon an article of furniture shining from excessive neatness, or upon the weapons hanging against the wall, the soft light was as softly reflected; and its rays seemed to linger everywhere upon something agreeable to the eye. The lamp which lighted the room, while the foliage of jasmine and columbine hung in masses from the window-frames, dazzlingly illuminated a damask table-cloth as white as snow. The table was laid for two persons. An amber-colored wine sparkled in the long cut-glass bottle; and a large jug of blue china, with a silver lid, was filled with foaming cider. Near the table, in a high-backed arm-chair, reclined, fast asleep, a woman of about thirty years of age, her face the very picture of health and freshness. Curled up upon her knees lay a large yellow cat, with her paws folded under her, and her eyes half closed, purring in that significant manner which, according to feline habits, indicates perfect contentment. The two friends paused before the window in complete amazement, while Planchet, perceiving their astonishment, was filled with delight.

"Ah, Planchet, you rascal!" said D'Artagnan, "I now understand your absences."

"Oh, there is some white linen!" said Porthos in his turn, in a voice of thunder.

At the sound of this voice the cat took flight, the housekeeper woke up suddenly, and Planchet, assuming a gracious air, introduced his two companions into the room, where the table was already laid.

"Permit me, my dear," he said, "to present to you M. le Chevalier d'Artagnan, my patron."

D'Artagnan took the lady's hand in his in the most courteous manner, and with precisely the same chivalrous air with which he would have taken Madame's.

"M. le Baron du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds," added Planchet.

Porthos made a reverence which Anne of Austria must have approved of, or she would indeed have been hard to please.

It was then Planchet's turn; and he unhesitatingly embraced the lady in question, not, however, until he had made a sign as if requesting D'Artagnan's and Porthos's permission, — a permission which was of course frankly conceded.

D'Artagnan complimented Planchet, and said, "You are indeed a man who knows how to make life agreeable."

"Life, Monsieur," replied Planchet, laughing, "is a capital which a man ought to invest as sensibly as he possibly can."

"And you get very good interest for yours," said Porthos, with a burst of laughter like a peal of thunder.

Planchet turned to his housekeeper. "You have before you, my dear," he said to her, "the two men who have influenced no small portion of my life. I have spoken to you about them both very frequently."

"And two others as well," said the lady, with a very decided Flemish accent.

"Madame is Dutch?" inquired D'Artagnan.

Porthos curled his mustache, — a circumstance which was not lost upon D'Artagnan, who remarked everything.

"I am from Antwerp," replied the lady.

"And her name is Madame Gechter," said Planchet.

"You should not call her Madame," said D'Artagnan.

"Why not?" asked Planchet.

"Because it would make her seem older every time you call her so."

"Well, I call her Trüchen."

"And a very pretty name too," said Porthos.

"Trüchen," said Planchet, "came to me from Flanders, with her virtue and two thousand florins. She ran away from a brute of a husband, who was in the habit of beating her. Being myself a Picard born, I was always very fond of the Artesian women, and it is only a step from Artois to Flanders. She came crying bitterly to her godfather, my predecessor in the Rue des Lombards; she placed her two thousand florins in my establishment, which I have turned to very good account, and which bring her in ten thousand."

"Bravo, Planchet!"

"She is free and well off; she has a cow, a maid-servant, and old Daddy Célestin at her orders. She mends my linen, knits my winter stockings, sees me only every fortnight, and is willing to consider herself happy."

"And I am very happy indeed," said Trüchen, with perfect ingenuousness.

Porthos began to curl the other side of his mustache.

"The deuce!" thought D'Artagnan, "can Porthos have any intentions in that quarter?"

In the mean time, perceiving what was the most important matter in hand, Trüchen had set her cook to work, had laid the table for two more, and covered it with sumptuous fare, — such as converts a supper into a repast, and a repast into a feast, — fresh butter, salt beef, anchovies, tunny, a shopful of Planchet's commodities, fowls, vegetables, salad, fish from the pond and the river, game from the forest, — all the produce, in fact, of the province. Moreover, Planchet returned from the cellar, laden with ten bottles of wine, the glass of which could hardly be seen for the thick coating of dust which covered them.

The sight of all this rejoiced Porthos's heart as he said,

"I am hungry;" and he took his seat beside Dame Trüchen, whom he looked at in the most killing manner. D'Artagnan seated himself on the other side of her; while Planchet, discreet and full of delight, sat opposite.

"Do not trouble yourselves," said Planchet, "if Trüchen should leave the table now and then during supper; for she will have to look after your bedrooms."

In fact, the housekeeper made her escape very frequently, and they could hear, on the first floor above them, the creaking of the wooden bedsteads and the rolling of the castors on the floor. While this was going on, the three men, Porthos especially, ate and drank gloriously; it was wonderful to see them. The ten full bottles were ten empty ones by the time Trüchen returned with the cheese. D'Artagnan still preserved his dignity and self-possession, but Porthos had lost a portion of his; the mirth soon began to be somewhat uproarious. D'Artagnan recommended a new descent into the cellar; and as Planchet did not walk with the steadiness of a well-trained foot-soldier, the captain of the Musketeers proposed to accompany him. They set off, humming songs wild enough to frighten anybody who might be listening. Trüchen remained behind at table with Porthos. While the two wine-bibbers were looking behind the firewood for what they wanted, a sharp, sonorous sound was heard like the impression of a pair of lips on a cheek.

"Porthos fancies himself at La Rochelle," thought D'Artagnan, as they returned freighted with bottles. Planchet
ing so loudly that he was incapable of noticing
D'Artagnan, whom nothing ever escaped, re-
ow much redder Trüchen's left cheek was than
Porthos was sitting and smiling at Trüchen's
was curling with both his hands both sides of his
at once; and Trüchen, too, was smiling at the

magnificent seigneur. The sparkling wine of Anjou very soon produced a remarkable effect upon the three companions. D'Artagnan had hardly strength enough left to take a candlestick to light Planchet up his own staircase. Planchet was pulling Porthos along, who was following Trüchen, who was herself jovial enough. It was D'Artagnan who found out the rooms and the beds. Porthos threw himself into the one destined for him, after his friend had undressed him. D'Artagnan got into his own bed, saying to himself, "*Mordioux!* I had made up my mind never to touch that light-colored wine, which brings my early camp-days back again. Fie! fie! if my musketeers were only to see their captain in such a state!" And drawing the curtains of his bed, he added, "Fortunately enough, though, they will not see me." Planchet was taken in charge by Trüchen, who undressed him and closed doors and curtains.

"The country is very amusing," said Porthos, stretching out his legs, which passed through the wooden foot-board, making a tremendous noise, of which, however, no one was capable of taking the slightest notice, so much had they been amused in Planchet's country-house. By two o'clock in the morning every one was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XIII.

SHOWING WHAT COULD BE SEEN FROM PLANCHET'S HOUSE.

The next morning found the three heroes sleeping soundly. Trüchen had closed the outside blinds to keep the first rays of the sun from the heavy eyes of her guests, like a kind, good woman. It was still perfectly dark, then, beneath Porthos's curtains and under Planchet's canopy, when D'Artagnan, awakened by an indiscreet ray of light which made its way through the windows, jumped hastily out of bed, as if he wished to be the first at the assault. He took by assault Porthos's room, which was next to his own. The worthy Porthos was sleeping with a noise like distant thunder; in the dim obscurity of the room his gigantic frame was prominently displayed, and his swollen fist hung down outside the bed upon the carpet. D'Artagnan awoke Porthos, who rubbed his eyes in a tolerably good humor. In the mean time Planchet was dressing himself, and came to meet at their bedroom doors his two guests, who were still somewhat unsteady from their previous evening's entertainment.

Although it was yet very early, the whole household was already up. The cook was mercilessly slaughtering in the poultry-yard, and Daddy Célestin was gathering cherries in the garden. Porthos, brisk and lively as ever, held out his hand to Planchet, and D'Artagnan requested permission to embrace Madame Trüchen. The latter, who cherished no ill-will towards the vanquished, approached Porthos, upon whom she conferred the same

favor. Porthos embraced Madame Trüchen, heaving an enormous sigh. Planchet took both his friends by the hand.

"I am going to show you over the house," he said. "When we arrived last evening it was as dark as an oven, and we were unable to see anything; but in broad daylight everything looks different, and you will be satisfied, I hope."

"If we begin by the view you have," said D'Artagnan, "that charms me beyond everything. I have always lived in royal mansions, you know; and princes have some very good ideas upon the selection of points of view."

"I am a great stickler for a good view myself," said Porthos. "At my Château de Pierrefonds I have had four avenues laid out, and at the end of each is a landscape of a character altogether different from the others."

"You shall see my prospect," said Planchet; and he led his two guests to a window.

"Ah!" said D'Artagnan, "this is the Rue de Lyon."

"Yes, I have two windows on this side, — a paltry, insignificant view, for there is always that bustling and noisy inn, which is a very disagreeable neighbor. I had four windows here, but I have kept only two."

"Let us go on," said D'Artagnan.

They entered a corridor leading to the bedrooms, and Planchet pushed open the outside blinds.

"Holloa! what is that out yonder?" said Porthos.

"The forest," said Planchet. "It is the horizon, — always a thick line, which is yellow in the spring, green in the summer, red in the autumn, and white in the winter."

"All very well; but it is like a curtain, which prevents one from seeing a greater distance."

"Yes," said Planchet; "still, one can see, at all events, everything between."

"Ah, the open country!" said Porthos. "But what is that I see out there, — crosses and stones?"

"Ah! that is the cemetery," exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Precisely," said Planchet; "I assure you it is very curious. Hardly a day passes in which some one is not buried there; for Fontainebleau is by no means an inconsiderable place. Sometimes we see young girls clothed in white carrying banners; at others, some of the town council, or rich citizens, with choristers and all the parish authorities; and then, too, we see some of the officers of the king's household."

"I should not like that," said Porthos.

"There is not indeed much amusement in it," said D'Artagnan.

"I assure you it encourages religious thoughts," replied Planchet.

"Oh, I don't deny that!"

"But," continued Planchet, "we must all die one day or another; and I once met with a maxim somewhere which I have remembered, that the thought of death is a thought that will do us all good."

"I am far from saying the contrary," said Porthos.

"But," objected D'Artagnan, "the thought of green fields, flowers, rivers, blue horizons, extensive and boundless plains, is no less likely to do us good."

"If I had any, I should be far from rejecting them," said Planchet; "but possessing only this little cemetery, full of flowers, so moss-grown, shady, and quiet, I am contented with it, and I think of those who live in town, in the Rue des Lombards for instance, and who have to listen every day to the rumbling of two thousand vehicles and to the trampling of a hundred and fifty thousand foot-passengers in the mud."

"But living," said Porthos, "living; remember that."

"That is exactly the reason," said Planchet, timidly, "why I feel that it does me good to see a few of the dead."

"Upon my word," said D'Artagnan, "that fellow Planchet was born to be a poet as well as a grocer."

"Monsieur," said Planchet, "I am one of those good-humored men whom Heaven has created to live a certain space of time, and to consider all things good which they meet with during their stay on earth."

D'Artagnan sat down close to the window; and as there seemed to be something substantial in Planchet's philosophy, he mused over it.

"Ah!" exclaimed Porthos, "if I am not mistaken, we are going to have a representation now, for I think I heard something like chanting."

"Yes," said D'Artagnan; "I hear singing too."

"Oh, it is only a burial of a very poor description," said Planchet, disdainfully; "the officiating priest, the beadle, and only one chorister boy, nothing more. You observe, Messieurs, that the defunct lady or gentleman could not have been of very high rank."

"No; no one seems to be following the coffin."

"Yes," said Porthos; "I see a man."

"You are right; a man wrapped up in a cloak," said D'Artagnan.

"It's not worth looking at," said Planchet.

"I find it interesting," said D'Artagnan, earnestly, leaning on the window.

"Come, come, you are beginning to take a fancy to the place already," said Planchet, delightedly. "It is exactly my own case. I was so melancholy at first that I could do nothing but make the sign of the cross all day, and the chants were like nails being driven into my head; but now the chants lull me to sleep, and no bird I have ever

seen or heard can sing better than those which are to be met with in this cemetery."

"Well," said Porthos, "this is beginning to get a little dull for me, and I prefer going downstairs."

Planchet with one bound was beside his guest, to whom he offered his hand to lead him into the garden.

"What!" said Porthos to D'Artagnan, as he turned round, "are you going to remain here?"

"Yes, my friend; I shall join you presently."

"Well, M. d'Artagnan is right, after all," said Planchet; "are they beginning to bury yet?"

"Not yet."

"Ah! yes, the grave-digger is waiting until the cords are fastened round the bier. But see! a woman has just entered the cemetery at the other end."

"Yes, yes, my dear Planchet," said D'Artagnan, quickly; "but leave me, leave me. I feel that I am beginning already to be much comforted by my meditations; so do not interrupt me."

Planchet left; and D'Artagnan remained, devouring with his eager gaze from behind the half-closed blinds what was taking place just before him. The two bearers of the corpse had unfastened the straps of the litter, and were letting their burden descend gently into the open grave. A few paces distant, the man with the cloak wrapped round him, the only spectator of this melancholy scene, was leaning with his back against a large cypress-tree, and kept his face and person entirely concealed from the grave-diggers and the priests. The corpse was buried in five minutes. The grave having been filled up, the priests turned away; and the grave-digger, having addressed a few words to them, followed them as they moved away. The man in the cloak bowed as they passed him, and put a piece of money into the grave-digger's hand.

"*Mordioux!*" murmured D'Artagnan; "why, that man is Aramis himself."

Aramis, in fact, remained alone, on that side at least; for hardly had he turned his head when a woman's footsteps and the rustling of her dress were heard in the path close to him. He immediately turned round, and took off his hat with the most ceremonious respect; he led the lady under the shelter of some walnut and lime trees which overshadowed a magnificent tomb.

"Ah! who would have thought it?" said D'Artagnan; "the Bishop of Vannes at a rendezvous! He is still the same Abbé Aramis as when he played the gallant at Noisy-le-Sec. Yes," added the musketeer; "but as it is in a cemetery the rendezvous is sacred;" and he began to laugh.

The conversation lasted for fully half an hour. D'Artagnan could not see the lady's face, for she kept her back turned towards him; but he saw perfectly well, by the erect attitude of both the speakers, by their gestures, by the measured and careful manner with which they glanced at each other, either by way of attack or defence, that they must be conversing about any other subject than that of love. At the end of the conversation the lady rose, and bowed most profoundly to Aramis.

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan; "this rendezvous finishes like one of a very tender nature, though. The cavalier kneels at the beginning, the young lady by and by gets tamed down, and then it is she who has to supplicate. Who is this girl? I would give anything to ascertain."

This seemed impossible, however, for Aramis was the first to leave; the lady carefully concealed her head and face, and then immediately departed. D'Artagnan could hold out no longer. He ran to the window which looked out on the Rue de Lyon, and saw Aramis just entering

the inn. The lady was proceeding in quite an opposite direction, and seemed, in fact, to be about to rejoin an equipage, consisting of two led horses and a carriage, which he could see standing close to the borders of the forest. She was walking slowly, her head bent down, absorbed in the deepest meditation.

"*Mordioux! mordioux!* I must and will learn who that woman is," said the musketeer again; and then, without further deliberation, he set off in pursuit of her. As he was going along he tried to think how he could possibly contrive to make her raise her veil. "She is not young," he said, "and is a woman of high rank in society. I ought to know that figure and carriage." As he ran, the sound of his spurs and of his boots upon the hard ground of the street made a strange jingling noise, — a fortunate circumstance in itself, which he had not reckoned upon. The noise disturbed the lady; she seemed to fancy that she was being either followed or pursued, which was indeed the case, and turned round. D'Artagnan started as if he had received a charge of small shot in his legs, and then turning suddenly round, as if he were going back the same way he had come, murmured, "Madame de Chevreuse!" D'Artagnan would not go home until he had learned everything. He asked Daddy Célestin to inquire of the grave-digger whose body it was they had buried that morning.

"A poor Franciscan mendicant friar," replied the latter, "who had not even a dog to love him in this world and to accompany him to his last resting-place."

"If that were really the case," thought D'Artagnan, "Aramis would not have been present at his funeral. The Bishop of Vannes is not precisely a dog so far as devotion goes; his scent, however, is quite as keen, I admit."

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW PORTHOS, TRÜCHEN, AND PLANCHET PARTED WITH ONE ANOTHER ON FRIENDLY TERMS, THANKS TO D'ARTAGNAN.

THERE was good living in Planchet's house. Porthos broke a ladder and two cherry-trees, stripped the raspberry-bushes, and was only unable to succeed in reaching the strawberry-beds on account, as he said, of his belt. Trüchen, who had got quite sociable with the giant, said that it was not the belt so much as the fear of bursting it; and Porthos, in a state of the highest delight, embraced Trüchen, who gathered him a handful of the strawberries, and made him eat them out of her hand. D'Artagnan, who came up in the mean time, scolded Porthos for his indolence, and silently pitied Planchet.

Porthos breakfasted with a very good appetite; and when he had finished he said, looking at Trüchen, "I could make myself very happy here."

Trüchen smiled at his remark; and so did Planchet, but the latter not without some embarrassment.

D'Artagnan then addressed Porthos: "You must not, my friend, let the delights of Capua make you forget the real object of our journey to Fontainebleau."

"My presentation to the king?"

"Certainly. I am going to take a turn in the town to get everything ready for that. Do not think of leaving the house, I beg."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Porthos.

Planchet looked at D'Artagnan nervously. "Will you be away long?" he inquired.

"No, my friend; and this very evening I will release you from two troublesome guests."

"Oh! M. d'Artagnan! can you say —"

"No, no; you are an excellent-hearted fellow, but your house is very small. Such a house, with only a couple of acres of land, would be fit for a king, and make him very happy too. But you were not born a great lord."

"No more was M. Porthos," murmured Planchet.

"But he has become so, my good fellow; his income has been a hundred thousand livres a year for the last twenty years, and for the last fifty years he has been the owner of a couple of fists and a backbone which have never found their match throughout the whole realm of France. Porthos is a man of the very greatest consequence compared to you, my son; and — well, I need say no more, for I know you are an intelligent fellow."

"No, no, Monsieur; explain what you mean."

"Look at your orchard stripped, your larder empty, your bedstead broken, your cellar almost exhausted; look too — at Madame Trüchen —"

"Oh, good gracious!" said Planchet.

"Porthos, you see, is lord of thirty villages, each containing three hundred lively vassals; and he is a very handsome man, that Porthos!"

"Oh, good gracious!" repeated Planchet.

"Madame Trüchen is an excellent person," continued D'Artagnan; "but keep her for yourself, do you understand?" and he slapped him on the shoulder.

Planchet at this moment perceived Porthos and Trüchen sitting close together in an arbor. Trüchen, with a grace of manner peculiarly Flemish, was making a pair of ear-

rings for Porthos out of double cherries, while Porthos was laughing as amorously as Samson did with Delilah. Planchet pressed D'Artagnan's hand, and ran towards the arbor. We must do Porthos the justice to say that he did not move as they approached, and very likely he did not think that he was doing any harm. Nor indeed did Trüchen move, either, which rather put Planchet out; but he had been so accustomed to see fashionable people in his shop, that he found no difficulty in putting a good countenance on what was disagreeable to him. Planchet seized Porthos by the arm, and proposed to go and look at the horses, but Porthos said he was tired. Planchet then suggested that the Baron du Vallon should taste some cordial of his own manufacture, which was not to be equalled anywhere, — an offer which the baron immediately accepted; and in this way Planchet managed to engage his enemy's attention during the whole of the day, by dint of sacrificing his cellar in preference to his *amour propre.* Two hours afterwards D'Artagnan returned.

"Everything is arranged," he said; "I saw his Majesty at the very moment he was setting off for the chase. The king expects us this evening."

"The king expects me!" cried Porthos, drawing himself up. It is a sad thing to have to confess, but a man's heart is like a restless billow; for from that very moment Porthos ceased to look at Madame Trüchen in that touching manner which had so softened the heart of the lady from Antwerp. Planchet encouraged these ambitious leanings in the best way he could. He related, or rather reviewed, all the splendors of the last reign, — its battles, sieges, and grand court ceremonies. He spoke of the luxurious display which the English made, and of the prizes which the three brave companions had won, and told how D'Artagnan, who at the beginning had been the humblest

of the three, had become their chief. He fired Porthos with a generous feeling of enthusiasm, by reminding him of his early youth now passed away; he enlarged, according to his ability, on the chastity of some great lord, and his religious respect for the obligations of friendship; he was eloquent, and skilful in his choice of subjects. He delighted Porthos, frightened Trüchen, and made D'Artagnan think.

At six o'clock the musketeer ordered the horses to be brought round, and told Porthos to get ready. He thanked Planchet for his kind hospitality, whispered a few vague words about a post he might succeed in obtaining for him at court, which immediately raised Planchet in Trüchen's estimation, in which the poor grocer — so good, so generous, so devoted — had become much lowered ever since the appearance and comparison with him of the two great gentlemen. Such, however, is woman's nature; she is ambitious to possess what she has not yet obtained, and disdains it as soon as it is acquired.

After having rendered this service to his friend Planchet, D'Artagnan said in a low tone to Porthos, "That is a very beautiful ring you have on your finger."

"It is worth three hundred pistoles," said Porthos.

"Madame Trüchen will remember you better if you leave her that ring," replied D'Artagnan, — a suggestion which Porthos seemed to hesitate to adopt.

"You think it is not beautiful enough, perhaps," said the musketeer. "I understand your feelings. A great lord like you would not think of accepting the hospitality of an old servant without paying him most handsomely for it; but I am sure that Planchet is too good-hearted a fellow to remember that you have an income of a hundred thousand livres a year."

"I have more than half a mind," said Porthos, flattered

by the remark, "to make Madame Trüchen a present of my little farm at Bracieux; that would be a finger-ring for her, — twelve acres."

"It is too much, my good Porthos, too much just at present. Keep it for a future occasion." He then took the ring off Porthos's finger, and approaching Trüchen said to her: "Madame, Monsieur the Baron hardly knows how to entreat you, out of regard for him, to accept this little ring. M. du Vallon is one of the most generous and discreet men of my acquaintance. He wished to offer you a farm that he has at Bracieux, but I dissuaded him from it."

"Oh!" said Trüchen, looking eagerly at the diamond.

"Monsieur the Baron!" exclaimed Planchet, quite overcome.

"My good friend!" stammered out Porthos, delighted at having been so well represented by D'Artagnan.

These several exclamations, uttered at the same moment, made quite a pathetic winding-up of a day which might have terminated grotesquely. But D'Artagnan was there, and on every occasion in which he had exercised any control, matters had ended in the way he desired. There were general embracings; Trüchen, whom the baron's munificence had restored to her proper position, very timidly, and blushing all the while, presented simply her forehead to the great lord with whom she had been on such very excellent terms the evening before. Planchet himself was overcome by a feeling of the deepest humility. In the same generous vein Porthos would have emptied his pockets into the hands of the cook and of Célestin; but D'Artagnan stopped him.

"No," he said; "it is now my turn." And he gave one pistole to the woman and two to the man; and the benedictions which were showered down upon them would

have rejoiced the heart of Harpagon himself, and have rendered even him prodigal of his money.

D'Artagnan made Planchet lead them to the château, and introduced Porthos into his own apartment, where he arrived safely without having been perceived by those whom he wished to avoid.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PRESENTATION OF PORTHOS.

At seven o'clock the same evening, the king gave an audience to an ambassador from the United Provinces, in the grand reception-room. The audience lasted a quarter of an hour. After this his Majesty received those who had been recently presented, together with a few ladies, who paid their respects first. In one corner of the room, concealed behind a column, Porthos and D'Artagnan were conversing together, waiting until their turn should come.

"Have you heard the news?" inquired the musketeer of his friend.

"No!"

"Well, look then!" Porthos raised himself on tiptoe, and saw M. Fouquet in full court dress, leading Aramis towards the king.

"Aramis!" said Porthos.

"Presented to the king by M. Fouquet."

"Ah!" ejaculated Porthos.

"For having fortified Belle-Isle," continued D'Artagnan.

"And I?"

"You — ah! you, as I have already had the honor of telling you, are the good-natured, kind-hearted Porthos; and so they begged you to take care of St. Mandé a little while."

"Ah!" repeated Porthos.

"But, very happily, I was there," said D'Artagnan, "and presently it will be my turn."

At this moment Fouquet addressed the king. "Sire,"

he said, "I have a favor to solicit of your Majesty. M. d'Herblay is not ambitious, but he knows he can be of some service. Your Majesty needs a representative at Rome, who should be able to exercise a powerful influence there; may I request a cardinal's hat for M. d'Herblay?" The king started. "I do not often solicit anything of your Majesty," said Fouquet.

"That is a reason, certainly," replied the king, who always expressed any hesitation which he might have in that manner, and to which remark there was nothing to be said in reply.

Fouquet and Aramis looked at each other.

The king resumed: "M. d'Herblay can serve us equally well in France, — an archbishopric, for instance."

"Sire," objected Fouquet, with a grace of manner peculiarly his own, "your Majesty overwhelms M. d'Herblay. The archbishopric may, in your Majesty's extreme kindness, be conferred in addition to the hat; the one does not exclude the other."

The king admired the readiness which Fouquet displayed, and smiled, saying, "D'Artagnan himself could not have answered better."

The king had no sooner pronounced the name, than D'Artagnan appeared. "Did your Majesty call me?" he said.

Aramis and Fouquet drew back a step, as if they were about to retire.

"Permit me, Sire," said D'Artagnan, quickly, as he led forward Porthos, — "permit me to present to your Majesty M. le Baron du Vallon, one of the bravest gentlemen of France."

Aramis, at the sight of Porthos, turned as pale as death, while Fouquet clinched his hands under his ruffles. D'Artagnan smiled at both of them; while Porthos bowed, visibly overcome before the royal presence.

"Porthos here?" murmured Fouquet in Aramis's ear.

"Hush! there is some treachery at work," said the latter.

"Sire," said D'Artagnan, "more than six years ago I ought to have presented M. du Vallon to your Majesty; but certain men resemble stars, they move not unless their friends accompany them. The Pleiades are never disunited; and that is the reason I have selected, for the purpose of presenting M. du Vallon to you, the very moment when you would see M. d'Herblay by his side."

Aramis almost lost countenance. He looked at D'Artagnan with a proud, haughty air, as though to accept the defiance which the latter seemed to throw down.

"Ah! these gentlemen are good friends, then?" said the king.

"Excellent friends, Sire; the one can answer for the other. Ask M. de Vannes how Belle-Isle was fortified."

Fouquet moved back a step.

"Belle-Isle," said Aramis, coldly, "was fortified by that gentleman;" and he indicated Porthos with his hand, who bowed a second time.

Louis could not withhold his admiration, though at the same time his suspicions were aroused.

"Yes," said D'Artagnan; "but ask Monsieur the Baron who aided him in his labors."

"Aramis," said Porthos, frankly; and he indicated the bishop.

"What the deuce does all this mean," thought the bishop, "and what sort of a termination are we to expect to this comedy?"

"What!" exclaimed the king, "is Monsieur the Cardinal — I mean, Monsieur the Bishop — called Aramis?"

"A *nom de guerre*," said D'Artagnan.

"A name of friendship," said Aramis.

"A truce to modesty!" exclaimed D'Artagnan. "Beneath the priest's robe, Sire, is concealed the most brilliant officer, the bravest gentleman, and the wisest theologian in your kingdom."

Louis raised his head. "And an engineer," he said, admiring Aramis's noble countenance and calm self-possession.

"An engineer for a particular purpose, Sire," said the latter.

"My companion in the Musketeers, Sire," said D'Artagnan, with great warmth of manner; "the man who has more than a hundred times aided your father's ministers by his advice, — M. d'Herblay, in a word, who with M. du Vallon, myself, and M. le Comte de la Fère, who is known to your Majesty, formed that quartette which was a good deal talked about during the late king's reign and during your Majesty's minority."

"And who has fortified Belle-Isle?" the king repeated in a significant tone.

Aramis advanced and said, "In order to serve the son as I have served the father."

D'Artagnan looked at Aramis most narrowly while he uttered these words, which displayed so much true respect, so much warm devotion, such entire frankness and sincerity, that even he, D'Artagnan, the eternal doubter, almost infallible in his judgment, was deceived by it. "A man who lies cannot speak in such a tone as that," he said.

Louis was overcome by it. "In that case," he said to Fouquet, who anxiously awaited the result of this ordeal, "the cardinal's hat is granted. M. d'Herblay, I pledge you my honor that the first promotion shall be yours. Thank M. Fouquet for it."

These words were overheard by Colbert; they stung

him to the quick, and he left the salon abruptly. "And you, M. du Vallon," said the king, "what have you to ask? I am pleased to have it in my power to acknowledge the services of those who were faithful to my father."

"Sire," began Porthos; but he was unable to proceed further.

"Sire," exclaimed D'Artagnan, "this worthy gentleman is overpowered by your Majesty's presence, — he who has so valiantly sustained the looks and the fire of a thousand foes. But knowing what his thoughts are, I — who am more accustomed to gaze upon the sun — can translate them; he needs nothing, he desires nothing but to have the happiness of gazing upon your Majesty for a quarter of an hour."

"You shall sup with me this evening," said the king, saluting Porthos with a gracious smile.

Porthos became crimson from delight and pride. The king dismissed him; and D'Artagnan pushed him out into the hall, after he had embraced him warmly.

"Sit next to me at table," said Porthos in his ear.

"Yes, my friend."

"Aramis is annoyed with me, I think."

"Aramis has never liked you so much as he does now. Fancy! it was I who was just now the means of his getting the cardinal's hat."

"Of course," said Porthos. "By the by, does the king like to have his guests eat much at his table?"

"It is a compliment to himself if you do," said D'Artagnan, "for he possesses a royal appetite."

"You gratify me exceedingly," said Porthos.

CHAPTER XVI.

EXPLANATIONS.

Aramis had cleverly managed to effect a diversion for the purpose of finding D'Artagnan and Porthos. He came up to the latter, behind one of the columns, and as he pressed his hand, said, "So you have escaped from my prison?"

"Do not scold him," said D'Artagnan; "it was I, dear Aramis, who set him free."

"Ah! my friend," replied Aramis, looking at Porthos, "could you not have waited with a little more patience?"

D'Artagnan came to the assistance of Porthos, who already began to breathe hard in perplexity.

"You see," said he to Aramis, "you members of the Church are great politicians; we, mere soldiers, go at once to the point. The facts are these. I went to pay my dear Baisemeaux a visit—"

Aramis pricked up his ears.

"Stay!" said Porthos; "you remind me that I have a letter from Baisemeaux for you, Aramis;" and Porthos held out to the bishop the letter which we have already seen. Aramis begged to be allowed to read it, and read it without D'Artagnan's feeling in the slightest degree embarrassed by the circumstance that he was so well acquainted with the contents of it. Besides, Aramis's face was so impenetrable that D'Artagnan could not but admire him more than ever; after he had read it, he put the letter into his pocket with the calmest possible air.

"You were saying, Captain?" he observed.

"I was saying," continued the musketeer, "that I had gone to pay Baisemeaux a visit on his Majesty's service."

"On his Majesty's service?" said Aramis.

"Yes," said D'Artagnan, "and, naturally enough, we talked about you and our friends. I must say that Baisemeaux received me coldly; so I soon took my leave of him. As I was returning, a soldier accosted me, and said (no doubt he recognized me, notwithstanding I was in citizen's dress), 'Captain, will you be good enough to read me the name written on this envelope?' and I read, 'To M. du Vallon, at M. Fouquet's, St. Mandé.' 'The deuce,' said I to myself, 'Porthos has not returned, then, as I fancied, to Belle-Isle or Pierrefonds, but is at M. Fouquet's house, at St. Mandé; and as M. Fouquet is not at St. Mandé, Porthos must be quite alone, or, at all events, with Aramis; I will go and see Porthos.' And I accordingly went to see Porthos."

"Very good," said Aramis, thoughtfully.

"You never told me that," said Porthos.

"I did not have the time, my friend."

"And you brought back Porthos with you here to Fontainebleau?"

"Yes, to Planchet's house."

"Does Planchet live at Fontainebleau?" inquired Aramis.

"Yes, near the cemetery," said Porthos, thoughtlessly.

"What do you mean by 'near the cemetery'?" said Aramis, suspiciously.

"Come," thought the musketeer, "since there is to be a squabble, let us take advantage of it."

"Yes; the cemetery," said Porthos. "Planchet certainly is a very excellent fellow, who makes very excellent preserves; but his house has windows which look out upon the cemetery, and a very melancholy prospect it is. So this morning —"

"This morning?" said Aramis, more and more excited.

D'Artagnan turned his back to them, and walked to the window, where he began to drum a march upon one of the panes of glass.

"Yes, this morning," Porthos went on, "we saw a man buried there."

"Ah!"

"Very depressing, was it not? I should never be able to live in a house from which burials can always be seen. D'Artagnan, on the contrary, seems to like it very much."

"So D'Artagnan saw it as well?"

"He not only saw it; he literally never took his eyes from it the whole time."

Aramis started, and turned to look at the musketeer; but the latter was already engaged in earnest conversation with De Saint-Aignan. Aramis continued to question Porthos; and when he had squeezed all the juice out of this enormous lemon, he threw the peel aside. He turned towards his friend D'Artagnan, and clapping him on the shoulder, when De Saint-Aignan had left him, the king's supper having been announced, said, "My friend."

"Yes, my dear fellow," replied D'Artagnan.

"We do not sup with his Majesty, I believe?"

"Yes, indeed, I do."

"Can you give me ten minutes' conversation?"

"Twenty, if you like. His Majesty will take quite that time to get properly seated at table."

"Where shall we talk, then?"

"Here, upon these seats, if you like. The king has left; we can sit down, and the hall is empty."

"Let us sit down, then."

They sat down, and Aramis took one of D'Artagnan's hands in his.

"Tell me candidly, my dear friend," said he, "whether you have not induced Porthos to distrust me a little."

"I admit that I have, but not as you understand it. I saw that Porthos was bored to death, and I wished, by presenting him to the king, to do for him and for you what you would never do for yourself."

"What is that?"

"Speak in your own praise."

"And you have done it most nobly. I thank you."

"And I brought the cardinal's hat a little nearer, just as it seemed to be retreating from you."

"Ah, I admit that," said Aramis, with a singular smile; "you are, indeed, not to be matched for making your friends' fortunes for them."

"You see, then, that I acted only with the view of making Porthos's fortune for him."

"Oh, I meant to have done that myself; but your arm reaches farther than ours."

It was now D'Artagnan's turn to smile.

"Come," said Aramis, "we ought to deal truthfully with each other; do you still love me, my dear D'Artagnan?"

"The same as I used to do," replied D'Artagnan, without committing himself too much by this reply.

"In that case, thanks; and now, for the most perfect frankness," said Aramis. "You came to Belle-Isle for the king."

"*Pardieu!*"

"You wished, then, to deprive us of the pleasure of offering Belle-Isle completely fortified to the king."

"But, my friend, before I could deprive you of that pleasure, I ought to have been made acquainted with your intention of doing so."

"You came to Belle-Isle without knowing anything?"

"Of you? yes. How the devil could I imagine that Aramis had become so clever an engineer as to be able to fortify like Polybius or Archimedes?"

"True. And yet you detected me yonder?"

"Oh, yes!"

"And Porthos too?"

"My dear fellow, I did not discover that Aramis was an engineer. I was only able to discover that Porthos might have become one. There is a Latin saying, 'One becomes an orator, one is born a poet;' but it has never been said, 'One is born Porthos, and one becomes an engineer.'"

"Your wit is always amusing," said Aramis, coldly. "Well, then, I will go on."

"Do so."

"When you found out our secret, you made all the haste you could to communicate it to the king."

"I certainly made as much haste as I could, my good friend, since I saw that you were making still more. When a man weighing two hundred and fifty-eight pounds, as Porthos does, rides post; when a gouty prelate — I beg your pardon, but you told me you were so — when a prelate scours along the road, — I naturally suppose that my two friends, who did not wish to be communicative with me, had certain matters of the highest importance to conceal from me, and so I made as much haste as my leanness and the absence of gout would allow."

"Did it not occur to you, my dear friend, that you might be rendering Porthos and myself a very sad service?"

"Yes, I thought it not unlikely; but you and Porthos made me play a very ridiculous part at Belle-Isle."

"Forgive me," said Aramis.

"Excuse me," said D'Artagnan.

"So that," pursued Aramis, "you now know everything?"

"No, indeed."

"You know that I was obliged to inform M. Fouquet at once of what had happened, in order that he might anticipate what you might have to tell the king?"

"That is rather obscure."

"Not at all; M. Fouquet has his enemies, — you will admit that, I suppose."

"Oh, yes."

"And one in particular."

"A dangerous one?"

"A mortal enemy. Well, in order to counteract that enemy's influence, it was necessary that M. Fouquet should give the king a proof of a great devotion to him and of his readiness to make the greatest sacrifices. He surprised his Majesty by offering him Belle-Isle. If you had been the first to reach Paris, the surprise would have been destroyed; it would have looked as if we had yielded to fear."

"I understand."

"That is the whole mystery," said Aramis, satisfied that he had quite convinced the musketeer.

"Only," said the latter, "it would have been more simple to have taken me aside at Belle-Isle, and said to me, 'My dear D'Artagnan, we are fortifying Belle-Isle-en-Mer in order to offer it to the king. Render us the service of telling us for whom you are acting. Are you a friend of M. Colbert or of M. Fouquet?' Perhaps I should not have answered you, but you would have added, 'Are you my friend?' I should have said, 'Yes.'" Aramis hung his head. "In this way," continued D'Artagnan, "you would have paralyzed my movements, and I should have gone to the king and said, 'Sire, M. Fouquet is fortifying

Belle-Isle, and exceedingly well too; but here is a note which the governor of Belle-Isle gave me for your Majesty;' or, 'M. Fouquet is about to wait upon your Majesty to explain his intentions with regard to it.' I should not have been placed in an absurd position; you would have enjoyed your surprise, and we should not have had any occasion to look askance at each other when we met."

"While, on the contrary," replied Aramis, "you have acted altogether as one friendly to M. Colbert; and you really are a friend of his, I suppose?"

"Certainly not, indeed!" exclaimed the captain. "M. Colbert is a mean fellow, and I hate him as I used to hate Mazarin, but without fearing him."

"Well, then," said Aramis, "I love M. Fouquet, and his interests are mine. You know my position. I have no property or means whatever. M. Fouquet gave me several livings, a bishopric as well; M. Fouquet has served and obliged me like the generous-hearted man he is, and I know the world sufficiently well to appreciate a kindness when I meet with it. M. Fouquet has won my regard, and I have devoted myself to his service."

"You could n't do better; you will find him a very good master."

Aramis bit his lips, and then said, "The best, I think, a man could possibly have." He then paused for a minute, D'Artagnan taking good care not to interrupt him. "I suppose you know how Porthos got mixed up in all this?"

"No," said D'Artagnan. "I am curious, of course; but I never question a friend when he wishes to keep his real secret from me."

"Well, then, I will tell you."

"It is hardly worth the trouble if th
bind me in any way."

"Oh, fear nothing! There is n

than Porthos, because he is so simple-minded and good. Porthos is so straightforward in everything. Since I have become a bishop I have looked for those simple natures which make me love truth and hate intrigue."

D'Artagnan stroked his mustache.

"I saw Porthos, and again cultivated his acquaintance; his own time hanging idly on his hands, his presence recalled my earlier and better days, — not, however, that I am so very wicked at present. I sent for Porthos to come to Vannes. M. Fouquet, whose regard for me is very great, having learned that Porthos and I were attached to each other, promised him increase of rank at the earliest promotion; and that is the whole secret."

"I shall not abuse your confidence," said D'Artagnan.

"I am sure of that, my dear friend; no one has a finer sense of honor than yourself."

"I flatter myself that you are right, Aramis."

"And now," — and here the prelate looked searchingly and scrutinizingly at his friend, — "now let us talk of ourselves and for ourselves. Will you become one of M. Fouquet's friends? Do not interrupt me until you know what that means."

"Well, I am listening."

"Will you become a marshal of France, peer, duke, and the possessor of a duchy, with a million of revenue?"

"But, my friend," replied D'Artagnan, "what must one do to get all that?"

"Belong to M. Fouquet."

"But I already belong to the king, my dear friend."

"Not exclusively, I suppose?"

"Oh! D'Artagnan cannot be divided."

"You have, I presume, ambitions, as noble hearts like yours have?"

"Yes, certainly I have."

"Well?"

"Well, I wish to be a marshal of France; the king will make me marshal, duke, peer, — the king will give me all that."

Aramis fixed his clear and searching gaze upon D'Artagnan.

"Is not the king master?" said D'Artagnan.

"No one disputes it; but Louis XIII. was master also."

"Oh! but, my dear friend, between Richelieu and Louis XIII. there was no M. d'Artagnan," said the musketeer, very quietly.

"There are many stumbling-blocks round the king," said Aramis.

"Not for the king."

"Very likely not; still —"

"One moment, Aramis. I observe that every one thinks of himself and never of this poor young prince; I will maintain myself in maintaining him."

"And if you meet with ingratitude?"

"The weak alone are afraid of that."

"You are quite certain of yourself?"

"I think so."

"Still, the king may have no further need of you!"

"On the contrary, I think his need of me will be greater than ever; and hearken, my dear fellow, if it became necessary to arrest a new Condé, what would do it? This — this alone in all France!" and D'Artagnan struck his sword.

"You are right," said Aramis, turning very pale; and then he rose and pressed D'Artagnan's hand.

"There is the last summons for supper," said the captain of the Musketeers; "will you excuse me?"

Aramis threw his arm round the musketeer's neck, and

said, "A friend like you is the brightest jewel in the royal crown." Then they separated.

"I was right," thought D'Artagnan; "there is something on foot."

"We must make haste to fire the train," said Aramis, "for D'Artagnan has discovered the match."

CHAPTER XVII.

MADAME AND DE GUICHE.

It will not be forgotten that the Comte de Guiche had left the room on the day when Louis XIV. had offered to La Vallière with so much generosity the beautiful bracelets he had won at the lottery. The count walked to and fro for some time outside the palace in the greatest distress, from a thousand suspicions and anxieties with which his mind was beset. Presently he stopped and waited on the terrace opposite the grove of trees, watching for Madame's departure. More than half an hour passed away; and as he was at that moment quite alone, the count could hardly have had any very diverting ideas at his command. He drew his tablets from his pocket, and after much hesitation determined to write these words:

"Madame, — I implore you to grant me one moment's conversation. Do not be alarmed at this request, which contains nothing in any way opposed to the profound respect with which I subscribe myself," etc.

He had signed and folded this singular supplication, when he observed many ladies leaving the château, and then several men, — in fact, almost every person who had formed the queen's circle. He saw La Vallière herself, then Montalais talking with Malicorne; he saw the departure of the very last of the numerous guests who had a short time before thronged the queen-mother's boudoir.

Madame herself had not passed. She would be obliged, however, to cross the courtyard in order to enter her own apartments; and from the terrace De Guiche could see all that was passing in the courtyard. At last he saw Madame leave, attended by two pages, who were carrying torches before her. She was walking very quickly; and as soon as she reached the door, she said, "Pages, let some one go and inquire after M. le Comte de Guiche; he has to render me an account of a commission he had to execute for me. If he should be disengaged, request him to be good enough to come to my apartment."

De Guiche remained silent and concealed in the shade; but as soon as Madame had withdrawn, he darted from the terrace down the steps, and assumed a most indifferent air, so that the pages who were hurrying towards his rooms might meet him.

"Ah, Madame is seeking me!" he said to himself, quite overcome; and he crushed in his hand the letter which had now become useless.

"Monsieur the Count," said one of the pages, perceiving him, "we are indeed most fortunate in meeting you."

"Why so, Messieurs?"

"A command from Madame."

"From Madame?" said De Guiche, looking surprised.

"Yes, Monsieur the Count, her royal Highness has been asking for you; you are to render account, she told us, of a commission you had to execute for her. Are you at liberty?"

"I am quite at her royal Highness's orders."

"Will you have the goodness to follow us, then?"

When De Guiche ascended to the princess's apartments, he found her pale and agitated. Montalais was standing at the door, apparently in some degree uneasy about what was passing in her mistress's mind. As De Guiche ap-

peared, "Ah! is that you, M. de Guiche?" said Madame; "pray come in. Mademoiselle de Montalais, I do not require your attendance any longer."

Montalais, more puzzled than ever, courtesied and withdrew; and De Guiche and the princess were left alone. The Count had every advantage in his favor; it was Madame who had summoned him to a rendezvous. But how was it possible for him to make use of this advantage? Madame was so whimsical, and her disposition was so changeable. She soon allowed this to be perceived, for, suddenly opening the conversation, she said, "Well! have you nothing to say to me?"

He imagined that she must have guessed his thoughts; he fancied, — for those who are in love are so constituted; they are as credulous and blind as poets or prophets, — he fancied that she knew how ardent was his desire to see her, and also the reason for it.

"Yes, Madame," he said; "and I think that affair very singular."

"The affair of the bracelets," she exclaimed eagerly, — "you mean that, I suppose?"

"Yes, Madame."

"And do you think that the king is in love? Tell me!"

De Guiche gave her a long and steady look; her eyes sank under his gaze, which seemed to read her very heart.

"I think," he said, "that the king may possibly have had the idea of annoying some one here. Were it not for that, the king would not show himself so earnest in his attentions as he is; he would not run the risk of compromising, from mere thoughtlessness of disposition, a young girl against whom no one has been hitherto able to say a word."

"Indeed! the bold, shameless girl!" said the princess, haughtily.

"I can positively assure your royal Highness," said De Guiche, with a respectful firmness, "that Mademoiselle de la Vallière is beloved by a man who merits every respect, for he is a brave and honorable gentleman."

"Bragelonne, perhaps?"

"My friend; yes, Madame."

"Well, and although he is your friend, what does that matter to the king?"

"The king knows that Bragelonne is affianced to Mademoiselle de la Vallière; and as Raoul has served the king most valiantly, the king will not inflict an irreparable injury upon him."

Madame began to laugh in a manner that produced a mournful impression upon De Guiche.

"I repeat, Madame, I do not believe that the king is in love with Mademoiselle de la Vallière; and the proof that I do not believe it is that I was about to ask you whose *amour propre* it is likely the king is, in this circumstance, desirous of wounding? You, who are well acquainted with the whole court, can perhaps assist me in ascertaining that; and assuredly with greater reason, too, since it is everywhere said that your royal Highness is on very intimate terms with the king."

Madame bit her lips, and, unable to assign any good and sufficient reasons, changed the conversation. "Prove to me," she said, fixing on him one of those looks in which the whole soul seems to pass into the eyes, — "prove to me that you intended to question me thus at the very moment I sent for you."

De Guiche gravely drew from his tablets what he had written, and showed it to her.

"Sympathy," she said.

"Yes," said the count, with a tenderness which he could not suppress, "sympathy. I have explained to you how

and why I sought you; you, Madame, have yet to tell me why you sent for me."

"True," replied the princess. She hesitated, and then suddenly exclaimed, "Those bracelets will drive me mad!"

"You expected that the king would offer them to you," replied De Guiche.

"Why not?"

"But before you, Madame, before you, his sister-in-law, was there not the queen herself, to whom the king should have offered them?"

"Before La Vallière," cried the princess, wounded to the quick, "could he not have presented them to me? Was there not the whole court, indeed, to choose from?"

"I assure you, Madame," said the count, respectfully, "that if any one were to hear you speak in this manner, if any one were to see how red your eyes are, and, Heaven forgive me! to see, too, that tear trembling on your eyelids, it would be said that your royal Highness was jealous."

"Jealous!" said the princess, haughtily; "jealous of La Vallière!"

She expected to see De Guiche yield beneath her haughty gesture and her proud tone; but he boldly repeated, "Jealous of La Vallière; yes, Madame."

"Am I to suppose, Monsieur," she stammered, "that you suffer yourself to insult me?"

"Pray, do not suppose any such thing, Madame," replied the count, slightly agitated, but resolved to master that fiery nature.

"Leave the room!" said the princess, thoroughly exasperated; De Guiche's coolness and silent respect had made her completely lose her temper.

De Guiche fell back a step, made his obeisance slowly, drew himself up looking as white as his lace cuffs, and in

a voice slightly trembling, said, "It was hardly worth while to have hurried here to be subjected to this unmerited disgrace;" and he turned away deliberately.

He had scarcely taken half-a-dozen steps when Madame darted like a tigress after him, seized him by the cuff, and making him turn round again, said, trembling with passion as she did so: "The respect that you pretend to have is more insulting than the insult itself. Insult me, if you please, but at least speak!"

"And do you, Madame," said the count, gently, as he drew his sword, "thrust this sword into my heart rather than kill me by slow degrees!"

At the look he fixed upon her, — a look full of love, resolution, and despair even, — she knew how readily the man, so outwardly calm in appearance, would pass his sword through his own breast if she added another word. She tore the blade from his hands, and pressing his arm with a feverish impatience which might pass for tenderness, said: "Do not be too hard with me, Count! You see how I am suffering, and you have no pity for me."

Tears, which were the last crisis of the attack, smothered her voice. As soon as De Guiche saw her weep, he took her in his arms and carried her to an arm-chair; in another moment she was choking with sobs.

"Oh! why," he murmured, as he knelt by her side, "why do you conceal your troubles from me? Do you love any one? Tell me! It would kill me, I know, — but not until after I should have comforted, consoled, and even served you."

"And do you love me to that extent?" she replied, completely conquered.

"I do indeed love you to that extent, Madame."

She placed both her hands in his. "My heart is in-

deed another's," she murmured in so low a tone that her voice could hardly be heard; but he heard it, and said,—

"Is it the king you love?"

She gently shook her head; and her smile was like a clear bright streak in the clouds, through which, after the tempest had passed away, one almost fancies Paradise is opening. "But," she added, "there are other passions stirring in a high-born heart. Love is poetry; but the life of the heart is pride. Count, I was born upon a throne; I am proud and jealous of my rank. Why does the king gather such unworthy objects round him?"

"Once more, I repeat," said the count, "you are acting unjustly towards that poor girl, who will one day be my friend's wife."

"Are you simple enough to believe that, Count?"

"If I did not believe it," he said, turning very pale, "Bragelonne should be informed of it to-morrow; indeed he should, if I thought that poor La Vallière had forgotten the vows she had exchanged with Raoul. But no, it would be cowardly to betray any woman's secret; it would be criminal to disturb a friend's peace of mind."

"You think, then," said the princess, with a wild burst of laughter, "that ignorance is happiness?"

"I believe it," he replied.

"Prove it to me, then," she said quickly.

"It is easily done, Madame. It is reported through the whole court that the king loves you, and that you return his affection."

"Well?" she said, breathing with difficulty.

"Well, suppose for a moment that Raoul, my friend, had come and said to me, 'Yes, the king loves Madame, and has made an impression upon her heart,' I possibly should have slain Raoul."

"It would have been necessary," said the princess, with

the obstinacy of a woman who feels herself not easily overcome, "for M. de Bragelonne to have had proofs, before he could venture to speak to you in that manner."

"It is, however, true," replied De Guiche, with a deep sigh, "that, not having been warned, I have learned nothing; and I now find that my ignorance has saved my life."

"So, then, you would drive your selfishness and coldness so far," said Madame, "that you would let this unhappy young man continue to love La Vallière?"

"I would, until La Vallière's guilt were revealed to me, Madame."

"But the bracelets?"

"Well, Madame, since you yourself expected to receive them from the king, what could I possibly have said?"

The argument was a telling one, and the princess was overwhelmed by it; and from that moment her defeat was assured. But as her heart and mind were instinct with noble and generous feelings, she understood De Guiche's extreme delicacy. She saw clearly that in his heart he really suspected that the king was in love with La Vallière, and that he did not wish to resort to the common expedient of ruining a rival in the mind of a woman, by giving the latter the assurance and certainty that this rival's affections were transferred to another woman. She guessed that his suspicions of La Vallière were aroused, and that, in order to leave himself time for his conviction to undergo a change, so as not to ruin her utterly, he was determined to pursue a certain straightforward line of conduct and gain a clearer understanding of affairs. She could read so much real greatness of character and such true generosity of disposition in her lover, that her heart seemed to warm with affection towards him, whose passion for her was so pure and delicate in its nature. Despite his fear of incurring her displeasure, De Guiche, by re-

taining his position as a man of proud independence of feeling and of deep devotion, became almost a hero in her estimation, and reduced her to the state of a jealous and small-minded woman. She loved him for it so tenderly that she could not refuse to give him a proof of her affection.

"See how many words we have wasted!" she said, taking his hand; "suspicions, anxieties, mistrust, suffer ings, — I think we have mentioned all those words."

"Alas, Madame, yes."

"Efface them from your heart as I drive them from mine. Count, whether La Vallière does or does not love the king, and whether the king does or does not love La Vallière, we will make from this moment a distinction in our two rôles. You open your eyes so wide that I am sure you do not understand me."

"You are so impetuous, Madame, that I always tremble at the fear of displeasing you."

"And see how he trembles now, poor fellow!" she said, with the most charming playfulness of manner. "Yes, Monsieur, I have two parts to perform. I am the sister of the king, the sister-in-law of the king's wife. In this character ought I not to take an interest in these domestic intrigues? Come, tell me what you think!"

"As little as possible, Madame."

"Agreed, Monsieur! But it is a question of dignity; and then, you know, I am the wife of the king's brother." De Guiche sighed. "A circumstance," she added, with an expression of great tenderness, "which will remind you that I am always to be treated with the profoundest respect." De Guiche fell at her feet, which he kissed with the religious fervor of a worshipper. "And I begin to think," she murmured, "that, really and truly, I have another part to perform. I was almost forgetting it."

"Name it, oh, name it!"

"I am a woman," she said, in a voice lower than ever, "and I love." He rose; she opened her arms, and their lips were pressed together. A footstep was heard behind the tapestry, and Montalais knocked.

"What is it, Mademoiselle?" said Madame.

"M. de Guiche is wanted," replied Montalais, who was just in time to see the agitation of the actors of these four rôles; for De Guiche had constantly carried out his part with the greatest heroism.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MONTALAIS AND MALICORNE.

MONTALAIS was right. M. de Guiche, summoned in every direction, was very much exposed, even from the multiplicity of affairs, to the risk of not answering to any of them. Madame, notwithstanding her wounded pride and her secret anger, could not, for the moment at least, reproach Montalais for having violated in so bold a manner the semi-royal order with which she had been dismissed. De Guiche also lost his presence of mind, or it would be better to say that he had already lost it before Montalais's arrival; for scarcely had he heard the young girl's voice, when, without taking leave of Madame, — as the most ordinary politeness required, even between persons equal in rank and station, — he fled from her presence, his heart tumultuously throbbing, and his brain on fire, leaving the princess with one hand raised, as though about to bid him adieu. De Guiche could say, as Chérubin said a hundred years later, that he bore away on his lips happiness enough to last an eternity. Montalais was at no loss, therefore, to perceive the agitation of the two lovers; the one who fled was agitated, and the one who remained was equally so.

"So, so," murmured the young girl, as she glanced inquisitively round her, "this time, at least, I think I know as much as the most curious woman could possibly wish to know." Madame felt so embarrassed by this inquisitorial look, that, as if she had heard Montalais's side-remark,

she did not speak a word to her maid of honor, but casting down her eyes retired at once to her bedroom.

Montalais, observing this, stood listening for a moment, and then heard Madame lock and bolt her door. By this she knew that the rest of the evening was at her own disposal; and making behind the door which had just been closed a rather disrespectful gesture which might mean "Good-night, Princess," she went down the staircase in search of Malicorne, who was very busily engaged at that moment in watching a courier who, covered with dust, had just left the Comte de Guiche's apartments. Montalais knew that Malicorne was engaged in a matter of some importance; she therefore allowed him to look and stretch out his neck as much as he pleased, and it was only when he had resumed his natural position that she touched him on the shoulder.

"Well," said Montalais, "what is the news?"

"M. de Guiche is in love with Madame," said Malicorne.

"Fine news, truly! I know something more recent than that."

"Well, what do you know?"

"That Madame is in love with M. de Guiche."

"The one is the consequence of the other."

"Not always, my good Monsieur."

"Is that remark intended for me?"

"Persons present are always excepted."

"Thank you," said Malicorne. "Well, and in the other direction what is there fresh?"

"The king wished, this evening, after the lottery, to see Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Well, and he has seen her?"

"No, indeed."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The door was shut and locked."

"So that — "

"So that the king was obliged to go back again, looking very sheepish, like a simple-minded thief who has forgotten his implements."

"Good!"

"And in the third direction," inquired Montalais.

"The courier who has just arrived for M. de Guiche came from M. de Bragelonne."

"Excellent!" said Montalais, clapping her hands together.

"Why so?"

"Because we shall have occupation. If we get weary now, something unfortunate will be sure to happen."

"We must divide the work, then," said Malicorne, "in order to avoid confusion."

"Nothing easier," replied Montalais. "Three intrigues, carefully nursed and carefully encouraged, will produce, one with another, and taking a low average, three love-letters a day."

"Oh!" exclaimed Malicorne, shrugging his shoulders, "you cannot mean what you say, darling; three letters a day, — that may do for sentimental common people. A musketeer on duty, a young girl in a convent, may exchange letters with their lovers once a day, perhaps, from the top of a ladder or through a hole in the wall. A letter contains all the poetry their poor little hearts have to boast of. But here, — oh, you little know royal affection, my dear!"

"Well, finish!" said Montalais, out of patience with him. "Some one may come."

"Finish! Why, I am only at the beginning. I have still three points as yet untouched."

"Upon my word, he will be the death of me, with his Flemish indifference!" exclaimed Montalais.

"And you will drive me mad with your Italian vivacity! I was going to say that our lovers here will be writing volumes to each other. But what are you driving at?"

"At this. Not one of our lady correspondents will be able to keep the letters she may receive."

"Very likely not."

"M. de Guiche will not be able to keep his, either."

"That is probable."

"Very well, then; I will take care of all that."

"That is the very thing which is impossible," said Malicorne.

"Why so?"

"Because you are not your own mistress,—your room is as much La Vallière's as yours, and there are certain persons who will think nothing of visiting and searching a maid of honor's room; because I am terribly afraid of the queen, who is as jealous as a Spaniard; of the queen-mother, who is as jealous as a couple of Spaniards; and, last of all, of Madame herself, who has jealousy enough for ten Spaniards."

"You forget some one else?"

"Who?"

"Monsieur."

"I was only speaking of the women. Let us add them up, then: we will call Monsieur, No. 1; No. 2, De Guiche; No. 3, the Vicomte de Bragelonne; No. 4, the king."

"The king?"

"Of course, the king, who not only will be more jealous, but still more powerful than all the rest put together. Ah, my dear!"

"Well?"

"Into what a wasp's nest you have thrust yourself!"

"And as yet not quite far enough, if you will follow me into it."

"Most certainly I will follow you. Yet — "

"Well, yet — "

"While we have time enough left, I think it will be more prudent to turn back."

"But I, on the contrary, think the most prudent course to take is to put ourselves at once at the head of all these intrigues."

"You will never be able to do it."

"With you, I could carry on ten of them. I am in my element, you must know. I was born to live at the court, as the salamander is made to live in the fire."

"Your comparison does not reassure me in the slightest degree in the world, my dear Montalais. I have heard it said, and by very learned men too, that, in the first place, there are no salamanders at all, and that if there were any, they would be perfectly roasted on leaving the fire."

"Your learned men may be very wise so far as salamanders are concerned, but your learned men would never tell you what I can tell you ; namely, that Aure de Montalais is destined, before a month is over, to become the first diplomat in the Court of France."

"Be it so; but on condition that I shall be the second."

"Agreed; an offensive and defensive alliance, of course."

"Only be very careful of any letters."

"I will hand them to you as fast as I receive them."

"What shall we tell the king about Madame?"

"That Madame is still in love with his Majesty."

"What shall we tell Madame about the king?"

"That she would be exceedingly wrong not to humor him."

"What shall we tell La Vallière about Madame?"

"Whatever we choose, for La Vallière is in our power."

"How so?"

"In two ways."

"What do you mean?"

"In the first place, through the Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"Explain yourself?"

"You do not forget, I hope, that M. de Bragelonne has written many letters to Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"I forget nothing."

"Well, then, it was I who received, and I who kept, those letters."

"And, consequently, it is you who have them still?"

"Yes."

"Where, — here?"

"Oh, no; I have them safe at Blois, in the little room you know well enough."

"That dear little room, that darling little room, the antechamber of the palace I intend you to live in one of these days. But I beg your pardon, you said that all those letters are in that little room?"

"Yes."

"Did you not put them in a box?"

"Of course; in the same box where I put all the letters I received from you, and where I put mine also when your business or your amusements prevented you from coming to our rendezvous."

"Ah, very good!" said Malicorne.

"Why are you so satisfied?"

"Because I see that there is a possibility of not having to run to Blois after the letters, for I have them here."

"You have brought the box away?"

"It was very dear to me because it belonged to you."

"Be sure to take care of it, for it contains original documents which will be of very great value by and by."

"I am perfectly well aware of that, indeed; and that is the very reason why I laugh as I do, and with all my heart too."

"And now, one last word."

"Why the last?"

"Do we need any one to assist us?"

"No one at all."

"Valets or maid-servants?"

"Bad, — detestable! You will give the letters, you will receive them. Oh! we must have no pride in this affair; otherwise M. Malicorne and Mademoiselle Aure, not transacting their own affairs themselves, will have to make up their minds to see them transacted by others."

"You are quite right; but what is going on yonder in M. de Guiche's room?"

"Nothing; he is only opening his window."

"Let us be gone;" and they both immediately disappeared, all the terms of the compact having been agreed upon.

The window, which had just been opened, was, in fact, that of the Comte de Guiche. But it was not, as uninformed persons may think, alone with the hope of catching a glimpse of Madame through her curtains that he seated himself by the open window, for his preoccupation of mind was not wholly due to love. He had just received, as we have already stated, the courier who had been despatched to him by De Bragelonne, the latter having written to De Guiche a letter which had made the deepest impression upon him, and which he had read over and over again. "Strange, strange!" he murmured. "How powerful are the means by which destiny hurries men on towards their fate!" and leaving the window in order to

approach nearer to the light, he again read over the letter which he had just received, whose lines seemed to burn through his eyes into his brain.

CALAIS.

MY DEAR COUNT, — I found M. de Wardes at Calais; he has been seriously wounded in an affair with the Duke of Buckingham. De Wardes is, as you know, unquestionably brave, but full of malevolent and wicked feelings. He conversed with me about yourself, for whom he says he has a warm regard; and also about Madame, whom he considers a beautiful and amiable woman. He has guessed your affection for a certain person. He also talked to me about the person whom I love, and showed the greatest interest on my behalf in expressing a deep pity for me, accompanied, however, by dark hints which alarmed me at first, but which I at last looked upon as the result of his usual love of mystery. These are the facts: He had received news of the court; you will understand, however, that it was only through M. de Lorraine. The report is, so says the news, that a change has taken place in the king's affections. You know whom that concerns. In the second place, the news continues, people are talking about one of the maids of honor, respecting whom various slanderous reports are being circulated. These vague phrases have not allowed me to sleep. I have been deploring, ever since yesterday, that my diffidence and vacillation of purpose should, notwithstanding a certain obstinacy of character I may possess, have left me unable to reply to these insinuations. In a word, therefore, M. de Wardes was setting off for Paris, and I did not delay his departure with explanations; for it seemed rather hard, I confess, to cross-examine a man whose wounds are hardly yet closed. In short, he was to travel by short stages, as he was anxious to leave, he said, in order to be present at a curious spectacle which the court cannot fail to offer within a very short time. He added a few congratulatory words, accompanied by certain sympathizing expressions. I could not understand the one any more than the other; I was bewildered by my own thoughts, and by a mistrust of this man, —

a mistrust which, as you know better than any one else, I have never been able to overcome. As soon as he left, my perception seemed to become clearer. It is hardly possible that a man of De Wardes's character should not have communicated something of his own malicious nature to the statements he made to me. Yet it is impossible that in the mysterious hints which he threw out in my presence there should not be some mysterious signification, which I might apply to myself or to some one with whom you are acquainted. Being compelled to leave as soon as possible, in obedience to the king's commands, the idea did not occur to me of running after M. de Wardes in order to obtain an explanation of his reserve; but I have despatched a courier to you with this letter, which will explain in detail all my various doubts. I regard you as myself. It is I who have thought, and it will be for you to act. M. de Wardes will arrive very shortly; endeavor to learn what he meant, if you do not already know it. M. de Wardes, moreover, pretended that the Duke of Buckingham left Paris crowned with Madame's love. This was an affair which would have unhesitatingly made me draw my sword, had I not felt that I was under the necessity of despatching the king's mission before undertaking any quarrel. Burn this letter, which Olivain will hand you. Whatever Olivain says you may confidently rely upon. Will you have the goodness, my dear count, to recall me to the remembrance of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, whose hand I kiss with the greatest respect.

Your devoted

VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE.

P. S. If anything serious should happen, — we should be prepared for everything, my dear friend, — despatch a courier to me with this single word, "Come," and I shall be in Paris within six-and-thirty hours after I shall have received your letter.

De Guiche sighed, folded the letter up a third time, and instead of burning it, as Raoul had recommended him to do, placed it in his pocket. He felt that he needed to read it over and over again.

"How much distress of mind, and yet how great a confidence, he shows!" murmured the count. "Raoul has poured out his whole soul in this letter. He forgets to mention the Comte de la Fère, and speaks of his respect for Louise. He cautions me on my account, and entreats me on his own. Ah!" continued De Guiche, with a threatening gesture, "you interfere in my affairs, M. de Wardes, do you? Very well, then; I shall now occupy myself with yours. And for you, poor Raoul, — you who intrust your heart to my keeping, — be assured that I will watch over it."

With this promise, De Guiche sent to beg Malicorne to come immediately to his apartments, if it were possible. Malicorne complied with the invitation with an activity which was the first result of his conversation with Montalais. And while De Guiche, who thought that his motive was undiscovered, cross-examined Malicorne, the latter, who appeared to be working in the dark, soon guessed his questioner's motives. The consequence was that after a quarter of an hour's conversation, during which De Guiche thought that he had ascertained the whole truth with regard to La Vallière and the king, he had learned absolutely nothing more than his own eyes had already acquainted him with; while Malicorne learned or guessed that Raoul, who was absent, was fast becoming suspicious, and that De Guiche intended to watch over the treasure of the Hesperides. Malicorne accepted the office of dragon. De Guiche fancied that he had done everything for his friend, and soon began to think of nothing but his own personal affairs. The next evening, De Wardes's return and his first appearance at the king's reception were announced. When that visit had been paid, the convalescent waited on Monsieur; De Guiche taking care, however, to be at Monsieur's apartments before the visit took place

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW DE WARDES WAS RECEIVED AT COURT.

MONSIEUR had welcomed De Wardes with that marked favor which all light and frivolous minds bestow on every novelty that may come in their way. De Wardes, whom indeed he had not seen for a month, was like fresh fruit to him. To treat him with marked kindness was an infidelity to his old friends, and there is always something fascinating in that; moreover, it was a sort of reparation to De Wardes himself. Nothing, consequently, could exceed the favorable notice Monsieur took of him. The Chevalier de Lorraine, who feared this rival not a little, but who respected a character and disposition which were precisely parallel to his own in every particular, with the addition of a courage which he did not himself possess, received De Wardes with a greater display of regard and affection than even Monsieur had shown. De Guiche, as we have said, was there also, but kept a little in the background, waiting very patiently until all these embraces were over.

De Wardes, while talking to the others, and even to Monsieur himself, had not for a moment lost sight of De Guiche, who he instinctively felt was there on his account. As soon as he had finished with the others, he went up to De Guiche. They both exchanged the most courteous compliments, after which De Wardes returned to Monsieur and to the other gentlemen.

In the midst of these congratulations on a happy return,

Madame was announced. She had been informed of De Wardes's arrival, and knowing all the details of his voyage and of his duel with Buckingham, was not sorry to be present to hear the remarks which she knew would be made without delay by one who she felt assured was her personal enemy. Two or three of her ladies accompanied her.

De Wardes saluted Madame in the most graceful and respectful manner, and, as a beginning of hostilities, announced, first of all, that he could furnish the Duke of Buckingham's friends with the latest news about him. This was a direct answer to the coldness with which Madame had received him. The attack was a vigorous one; and Madame felt the blow, but did not appear to have even noticed it. He rapidly cast a glance at Monsieur and at De Guiche; the former had colored, and the latter had turned very pale. Madame alone preserved an unmoved countenance; but as she knew how many unpleasant thoughts and feelings her enemy could awaken in the two persons who were listening to him, she smilingly bent forward towards the traveller, as if to listen to the news he had brought. But he was speaking of other matters. Madame was brave, even to imprudence. If she were to retreat, it would be inviting an attack; so, after the first disagreeable impression had passed away, she returned to the charge.

"Have you suffered much from your wounds, M. de Wardes?" she inquired; "for we have been told that you had the misfortune to be wounded."

It was now De Wardes's turn to wince. He bit his lips, and replied, "No, Madame, hardly at all."

"And yet in this terribly hot weather —"

"The sea-breezes are fresh and cool, Madame; and then I had one consolation."

"Indeed! What was it?"

"The knowledge that my adversary's sufferings were still greater than my own."

"Ah! you mean that he was more seriously wounded than you were? I was not aware of that," said the princess, with utter indifference.

"Oh, Madame, you are mistaken, or rather you pretend to misunderstand my remark. I did not say that he was suffering more in body than myself; but his heart was seriously affected."

De Guiche comprehended in what direction the struggle was tending; he ventured to make a sign to Madame, as if entreating her to retire from the contest. But she, without acknowledging De Guiche's gesture, without showing that she had noticed it even, and still smiling, continued, "Is it possible," she said, "that the Duke of Buckingham's heart was touched? I had no idea, until now, that a heart-wound could be cured."

"Alas! Madame," replied De Wardes, politely, "every woman believes that; and it is that belief which gives them over us the superiority of confidence."

"You misunderstand altogether, dearest," said the prince, impatiently. "M. de Wardes means that the Duke of Buckingham's heart had been touched, not by a sword, but by something else."

"Ah, very good, very good!" exclaimed Madame. "It is a jest of M. de Wardes's. Very good; but I should like to know if the Duke of Buckingham would relish the jest. It is, indeed, a very great pity that he is not here, M. de Wardes."

The young man's eyes seemed to flash fire. "Oh," he said, as he clinched his teeth, "there is nothing I should like better!"

De Guiche did not move. Madame seemed to expect

that he would come to her assistance. Monsieur hesitated. The Chevalier de Lorraine advanced and took up the conversation.

"Madame," he said, "De Wardes knows perfectly well that for a Buckingham's heart to be touched is nothing new; and what he has said has already taken place."

"Instead of an ally, I have two enemies," murmured Madame, — "two determined enemies, and in league with each other;" and she changed the conversation. To change the conversation is, as every one knows, a right possessed by princes which etiquette requires all to respect. The remainder of the conversation was moderate enough in its tone; the principal actors had finished their parts.

Madame withdrew early; and Monsieur, who wished to question her on several matters, offered her his hand on leaving. The chevalier was seriously afraid that a good understanding might be established between the husband and wife if he were to leave them quietly together. He therefore made his way to Monsieur's apartments, in order to surprise him on his return, and to destroy with a few words all the good impressions that Madame might have been able to sow in his heart.

De Guiche advanced towards De Wardes, who was surrounded by a large number of persons, and thereby indicated his wish to converse with him. De Wardes at the same time showed, by his looks and by a movement of his head, that he perfectly understood him. There was nothing in these signs to enable strangers to suppose that they were not upon the most friendly footing. De Guiche could therefore turn away from him, and wait until he was at liberty. He had not long to wait, — for De Wardes, freed from his questioners, approached De Guiche; and both of them, after a fresh salutation, began to walk side by side together.

"You have made a good impression since your return, my dear De Wardes," said the count.

"Excellent, as you see."

"And your spirits are just as lively as ever?"

"More than ever."

"That is great good fortune."

"Why not? Everything is so ridiculous in this world, everything is so absurd around us."

"You are right."

"You are of my opinion, then?"

"I should think so! And what news do you bring us from yonder?"

"I? None at all. I have come to look for news here."

"But, tell me, you surely must have seen some people at Boulogne, — one of our friends, for instance; it is not a long time ago."

"Some people, — one of our friends — "

"You have a short memory."

"Ah! true; Bragelonne, you mean."

"Exactly so."

"Who was on his way to fulfil a mission to King Charles."

"Precisely. Well, then, did he not tell you, or did you not tell him — "

"I do not exactly know what I told him, I must confess; but I do know what I did not tell him."

De Wardes was cunning itself. He perfectly well knew from De Guiche's tone and manner, which was cold and dignified, that the conversation was about to assume a disagreeable turn. He resolved to let it take what course it pleased, and to keep strictly on his guard.

"May I ask what it was you did not tell him?" inquired De Guiche.

"Well, that about La Vallière."

"La Vallière — What is it? and what is that strange circumstance you seem to have known out yonder, with which Bragelonne, who was here on the spot, was not acquainted?"

"Do you really ask me that in a serious manner?"

"Nothing can be more so."

"What! you, a member of the court, living in Madame's household, a friend of Monsieur, a guest at their table, the favorite of our lovely princess!"

De Guiche colored violently from anger. "To what princess are you alluding?" he said.

"I am only acquainted with one, my dear fellow. I am speaking of Madame herself. Are you devoted to another princess, then? Come, tell me!"

De Guiche was on the point of launching out, but he saw the drift of the remark. A quarrel was imminent between the two young men. De Wardes wished the quarrel to be only in Madame's name, while De Guiche would not accept it except on La Vallière's account. From this moment it became a series of feigned attacks, which would continue until one of the two had been touched home. De Guiche therefore resumed all his self-possession.

"There is not the slightest question in the world of Madame in this matter, my dear De Wardes," said De Guiche, "but simply of what you were talking about just now."

"What was I saying?"

"That you had concealed certain things from M. de Bragelonne."

"Certain things which you know as well as I do," replied De Wardes.

"No, upon my honor!"

"Nonsense!"

"If you tell me what it is, I shall know, but not otherwise, I swear."

"What! I, who have just arrived from a distance of sixty leagues, and you, who have not stirred from this place, who have witnessed with your own eyes that of which rumor informed me at Calais, — do I understand you to tell me seriously that you do not know what it is about? Oh, Count, this is hardly charitable of you!"

"As you like, De Wardes; but I repeat, I know nothing."

"You are very discreet, — well, it is prudent."

"And so you will not tell me anything, — will not tell me any more than you told Bragelonne?"

"You are pretending to be deaf, I see. I am convinced that Madame could not possibly have more command over herself than you have over yourself."

"Double hypocrite!" murmured De Guiche, "there you are again returning to your own subject!"

"Very well, then," continued De Wardes, "since we find it so difficult to understand each other about La Vallière and Bragelonne, let us speak about your own affairs."

"Nay," said De Guiche, "I have no affairs of my own to talk about. You have not said anything about me, I suppose, to Bragelonne, which you cannot repeat to myself."

"No; but understand me, De Guiche, that however much I may be ignorant of certain matters, I am quite as conversant with others. If, for instance, we were conversing about certain intimacies of the Duke of Buckingham at Paris, as I did during my journey with the duke, I could tell you a great many interesting circumstances. Would you like me to mention them?"

De Guiche passed his hand across his forehead, which was covered with perspiration. "Why, no," he said, "a

hundred times no! I have no curiosity for matters which do not concern me. The Duke of Buckingham is nothing more than a simple acquaintance, while Raoul is an intimate friend. I have not the slightest curiosity to learn what happened to the Duke of Buckingham, while I have, on the contrary, the greatest interest in learning what happened to Raoul."

"At Paris?"

"Yes, at Paris or at Boulogne. You understand, I am on the spot, — if anything should happen, I am here to meet it; while Raoul is absent, and has only myself to represent him: so Raoul's affairs before my own."

"But Raoul will return."

"Yes, when his mission is completed. In the mean time, you understand, evil reports cannot be permitted to circulate about him without my looking into them."

"And the more occasion, since he will remain some time in London," said De Wardes, chuckling.

"You think so?" asked De Guiche, simply.

"Think so, indeed! Do you suppose that he was sent to London for no other purpose than to go there and return again immediately? No, no; he was sent to London to remain there."

"Ah, Count!" said De Guiche, seizing De Wardes's hand violently, "that is a very serious suspicion concerning Bragelonne, which completely confirms what he wrote to me from Boulogne."

De Wardes resumed his former coldness of manner. His love of raillery had led him too far, and by his own imprudence he had laid himself open to attack. "Well, tell me, what did he write to you about?" he inquired.

"He told me that you had artfully insinuated some injurious remarks against La Vallière, and that you had

seemed to laugh at his great confidence in that young girl."

"Well, it is perfectly true that I did so," said De Wardes, "and I was quite ready at the time to hear from the Vicomte de Bragelonne that which every man expects another to say whenever anything may have been said to displease him. In the same way, for instance, if I were seeking a quarrel with you I should tell you that Madame, after having shown the greatest preference for the Duke of Buckingham, is at this moment supposed to have sent the handsome duke away for your benefit."

"Oh, that would not wound me in the slightest degree, my dear De Wardes!" said De Guiche, smiling, notwithstanding the shiver which ran through his whole frame. "Why, such a favor as that would be too great a happiness."

"I admit that. But if I absolutely wished to quarrel with you I should try to invent a falsehood perhaps, and should speak to you about a certain grove where you and that illustrious princess were together, — I should speak also of certain genuflections, of certain kissings of the hand; and you, who are so secret on all occasions, so hasty and punctilious — "

"Well," said De Guiche, interrupting him, with the same smile upon his lips, although he felt almost as if he were going to die, "I swear I should not care for that, nor should I in any way contradict you; for you must know, my dear count, that in all matters which concern myself I am a block of ice. But it is a very different thing when an absent friend is concerned, — a friend who on leaving confided his interests to my safe-keeping; for such a friend, De Wardes, believe me, I am like fire itself."

"I understand you, M. de Guiche; but in spite of what you say, there cannot be any question between us just

now, either of Bragelonne or of this insignificant young girl, whose name is La Vallière."

At this moment some of the younger courtiers were crossing the apartment, and having already heard the few words which had just been pronounced, were able also to hear those which were about to follow. De Wardes observed this, and continued aloud: "Oh! if La Vallière were a coquette like Madame, whose very innocent flirtations, I am sure, were, first of all, the cause of the Duke of Buckingham's being sent to England, and afterwards were the reason of your being sent into exile, you — for you will not deny, I suppose, that Madame's seductive manners did have a certain influence over you —"

The courtiers drew nearer to the two speakers; De Saint-Aignan at their head, and then Manicamp.

"But, my dear fellow, whose fault was that?" said De Guiche, laughing. "I am a vain, conceited fellow, I know, and everybody else knows it too. I took seriously that which was intended only as a jest, and I got myself exiled for my pains. But I saw my error. I overcame my vanity, and I obtained my recall by making the *amende honorable*, and by promising myself to overcome this defect; and the consequence is that I am so thoroughly cured that I now laugh at the very thing which three or four days ago would have almost broken my heart. But Raoul is in love, and is loved in return; he cannot laugh at the reports which disturb his happiness, — reports which you seem to have undertaken to interpret, when you knew, Count, as I do, as those gentlemen do, as every one does in fact, that these reports were pure calumny."

"Calumny!" exclaimed De Wardes, furious at seeing himself caught in the snare by De Guiche's coolness of temper.

"Certainly, a calumny. Look at this letter from him,

in which he tells me you have spoken ill of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and asks me if what you said about this young girl be true. Do you wish me to appeal to these gentlemen, De Wardes, to decide?" and with the greatest coolness De Guiche read aloud the part of the letter which referred to La Vallière. "And now," continued De Guiche, "I have not the least doubt in the world that you wished to disturb Bragelonne's peace of mind, and that your remarks were maliciously intended."

De Wardes looked round him to see whether he could find support from any one; but at the idea that De Wardes had insulted, either directly or indirectly, the idol of the day, every one shook his head, and De Wardes saw that there was no one present who would have refused to say that he was in the wrong.

"Messieurs," said De Guiche, intuitively divining the general feeling, "my discussion with M. de Wardes refers to a subject so delicate in its nature that it is most important that no one should hear more than you have already heard. Close the doors then, I beg you, and let us finish our conversation in the manner which becomes two gentlemen, one of whom has given the other the lie."

"Messieurs, Messieurs!" exclaimed those who were present.

"Is it your opinion, then, that I was wrong in defending Mademoiselle de la Vallière?" said De Guiche. "In that case I pass judgment upon myself, and am ready to withdraw the offensive words which I may have used to M. de Wardes."

"*Peste!* certainly not!" said De Saint-Aignan. "Mademoiselle de la Vallière is an angel."

"Virtue and purity itself," said Manicamp.

"You see, M. de Wardes," said De Guiche, "that I am not the only one who undertakes the defence of that poor

girl. I entreat you, therefore, Messieurs, a second time, to leave us. You see that it is impossible that we could be more calm and composed than we are."

The courtiers asked nothing better than to go away. Some went out at one door, and the rest at another; and the two young men were left alone.

"Well played," said De Wardes to the count.

"Was it not?" replied the latter.

"What can you expect, my dear fellow? I have got quite rusty in the country, while the command you have acquired over yourself, Count, confounds me. A man always gains something in woman's society; so pray accept my congratulations."

"I accept them."

"And I will make Madame a present of them."

"Oh! now, my dear M. de Wardes, let us speak of her as loudly as you please."

"Do not defy me!"

"Oh! I defy you! You are known to be an evil-minded man; if you do that, you will be looked upon as a coward too, and Monsieur will have you hanged, this evening, at his window-casement. Speak, my dear De Wardes, speak!"

"I have fought already."

"But not quite enough yet."

"I see that you would not be sorry to beat me soundly."

"No; better still!"

"The deuce! you are unfortunate in the moment you have chosen, my dear count. A duel, after the one I have just fought, would hardly suit me. I have lost too much blood at Boulogne; at the slightest effort my wounds would open again, and you would really have too good a bargain with me."

"True," said De Guiche; "and yet, on your arrival here, your looks and your arms showed that there was nothing the matter with you."

"Yes, my arms are all right, but my legs are weak. And then, I have not had a foil in my hand since that devil of a duel; while you, I will answer for it, have been fencing every day, in order to carry your little conspiracy against me to a successful issue."

"Upon my honor, Monsieur," replied De Guiche, "it is six months since I last practised."

"No, Count, after due deliberation, I will not fight, at least with you. I shall await Bragelonne's return, since you say that it is Bragelonne who has fault to find with me."

"Oh, no, indeed! You shall not wait until Bragelonne's return," exclaimed De Guiche, losing all command over himself, "for you have said that it might possibly be some time before Bragelonne returns, and in the mean while your wicked insinuations will have had their effect."

"Yet I shall have my excuse; so take care!"

"I will give you a week to finish your recovery."

"That is better. In a week we will see."

"Yes, yes, I understand; a week will give time to my adversary to make his escape. No, no; I will not give you one day, even."

"You are mad, Monsieur," said De Wardes, retreating a step.

"And you are a coward, if you do not fight willingly. Nay, what is more, I will denounce you to the king, as having refused to fight after having insulted La Vallière."

"Ah!" said De Wardes, "you are dangerously treacherous, though you pass for a man of honor."

"There is nothing more dangerous than the treachery of the man whose conduct is always loyal and upright."

"Restore me the use of my legs, then, or get yourself bled, till you are as white as I am, so as to equalize our chances."

"No, no; I have something better than that to propose."

"What is it?"

"We will mount on horseback, and will exchange three pistol-shots each. You are a first-rate marksman. I have seen you bring down swallows with single balls, and at full gallop. Do not deny it, for I have seen you myself."

"I believe you are right," said De Wardes; "and as that is the case, it is not unlikely I might kill you."

"You would be rendering me a very great service, if you did."

"I will do my best."

"Is it agreed?"

"Give me your hand upon it."

"There it is, — but on one condition, however."

"Name it."

"That not a word shall be said about it to the king."

"Not a word, I swear."

"I shall go and get my horse, then."

"And I, mine."

"Where shall we meet?"

"In the open plain; I know an admirable place."

"Shall we go together?"

"Why not?"

Both of them, on their way to the stables, passed beneath Madame's windows, which were faintly lighted; a shadow could be seen on the lace curtains.

"There is a woman," said De Wardes, smiling, "who does not suspect that we are going to fight — to die, perhaps — on her account."

CHAPTER XX.

THE COMBAT.

De Wardes and De Guiche selected their horses, and then saddled them with their own hands with holster-saddles. De Wardes had no pistols; so De Guiche, having two pairs of them, went to his rooms to get them; and after having loaded them, gave the choice to De Wardes, who selected the pair he had made use of twenty times before, — the same, indeed, with which De Guiche had seen him kill swallows flying. "You will not be surprised," he said, "if I take every precaution. You know the weapons well, and consequently I am only making the chances equal."

"Your remark was quite useless," replied De Guiche, "and you have done no more than you are entitled to do."

"Now," said De Wardes, "I beg you to have the goodness to help me to mount; for I still experience a little difficulty in doing so."

"In that case it would be better to settle the matter on foot."

"No; once in the saddle, I shall be all right."

"Very good, then; say no more," said De Guiche, as he assisted De Wardes to mount his horse.

"And now," continued De Wardes, "in our eagerness to kill each other, we have neglected one circumstance."

"What is that?"

"That it is quite dark, and we shall almost be obliged to grope about, in order to kill each other."

"Well, the result will be the same."

"Moreover, we must observe one thing more, that men of honor do not go out to fight without companions."

"Oh!" said De Guiche, "you are as anxious as I am that everything should be done in proper order."

"Yes; but I do not wish people to say that you have assassinated me, any more than, supposing I were to kill you, I should myself like to be accused of such a crime."

"Did any one make a similar remark about your duel with the Duke of Buckingham?" said De Guiche; "it took place under precisely the same conditions as ours."

"Very true; but there was still light enough to see by, and we were up to our middles almost in the water; besides, there were a good number of spectators on shore, looking at us."

De Guiche reflected for a moment; and the thought which had already presented itself to him became more confirmed, — that De Wardes wished to have witnesses present, in order to bring back the conversation about Madame, and to give a new turn to the combat. He did not say a word in reply, therefore; and as De Wardes once more looked at him interrogatively, he replied, by a movement of the head, that it would be best to let things remain as they were.

The two adversaries consequently set off, and left the château by the gate close to which we may remember to have seen Montalais and Malicorne together. The night, as if to counteract the extreme heat of the day, had gathered the clouds together in masses which were moving slowly and silently along from the west to the east. The vault above, without a clear spot anywhere visible or without the faintest indication of thunder, seemed to hang heavily over the earth, and soon began, by the force of

the wind, to be split up into fragments, like a huge sheet torn into shreds. Large and warm drops of rain began to fall heavily, and gathered the dust into globules, which rolled along the ground. At the same time the hedges, which seemed conscious of the approaching storm, the thirsty plants, the drooping branches of the trees, exhaled a thousand aromatic odors, which revived in the mind tender recollections, thoughts of youth, eternal life, happiness, and love.

"How fresh the earth smells!" said De Wardes; "it is a piece of coquetry of hers to draw us to her."

"By the by," replied De Guiche, "several ideas have just occurred to me, and I wish to have your opinion upon them."

"Relative to —"

"Relative to our engagement."

"It is quite time, it seems to me, that we should begin to arrange matters."

"Is it to be an ordinary combat, and conducted according to established custom?"

"Let me first know what your established custom is."

"That we dismount in any particular plain that may suit us, fasten our horses to the nearest object, meet each without our pistols in our hands, then retire for a hundred and fifty paces, in order to advance on each other."

"Very good; that is precisely the way in which I killed poor Follivent, three weeks ago, at St. Denis."

"I beg your pardon, but you forget one circumstance."

"What is that?"

"That in your duel with Follivent you advanced towards each other on foot, your swords between your teeth and your pistols in your hands."

"True."

"While now, on the contrary, as you cannot walk, — you yourself admit that, — we shall have to mount our horses again, and charge; and the first who wishes to fire will do so."

"That is the best course, no doubt; but it is quite dark. We must make allowance for more missed shots than would be the case in the daytime."

"Very well; each will fire three times, — the pair of pistols already loaded, and one reload."

"Excellent! Where shall our engagement take place?"

"Have you any preference?"

"No."

"You see that small wood which lies before us?"

"The wood which is called Rochin? Certainly."

"You know it, then?"

"Perfectly."

"You know, then, that there is an open glade in the centre?"

"Yes."

"Well, this glade is a natural arena, with a variety of roads, by-places, paths, ditches, windings, and avenues. We could not find a better spot."

"I am perfectly satisfied, if you are so. We have arrived, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes. Look at the beautiful open space in the centre. The faint light which the stars afford, as Corneille says, seems concentrated in this spot; the woods which surround it seem, with their barriers, to form its natural limits."

"Very good. Do, then, as you say."

"Let us first settle the conditions."

"These are mine; if you have any objection to make, you will state it."

"I am listening."

"If the horse be killed, its rider will be obliged to fight on foot."

"That is a matter of course, since we have no change of horses here."

"But that does not oblige his adversary to dismount."

"His adversary will be free to act as he likes."

"The adversaries, having once met in close contact, cannot withdraw again, and may consequently fire muzzle to muzzle."

"Agreed."

"Three shots and no more."

"Quite sufficient, I think. Here are powder and balls for your pistols. Measure out three charges, take three balls; I will do the same. Then we will throw the rest of the powder and the balls away."

"And we will solemnly swear," said De Wardes, "that we have neither balls nor powder about us?"

"Agreed; and I swear it," said De Guiche, holding his hand towards heaven, — a gesture which De Wardes imitated.

"And now, my dear count," said De Wardes, "allow me to tell you that I am in no way your dupe. You are, or soon will be, the accepted lover of Madame. I have detected your secret, and you are afraid I shall make it known. You wish to kill me, to insure my silence, — that is very clear; and in your place I should do the same." De Guiche hung down his head. "Only," continued De Wardes, triumphantly, "was it really worth while, tell me, to throw this mean affair of Bragelonne's upon my shoulders? But, take care, my dear fellow! in bringing the wild boar to bay, you enrage him to madness; in running down the fox, you give him the ferocity of the jaguar. The consequence is, that, brought to bay by you, I shall defend myself to the very last."

"You will be quite right in doing so."

"Yes; but take care! I shall work more harm than you think. In the first place, as a beginning, you will readily suppose that I have not been absurd enough to lock up my secret, or your secret rather, in my own breast. There is a friend of mine, a man of the highest intelligence, whom you know very well, who shares my secret with me; so pray understand that if you kill me, my death will not have been of much service to you; while, on the contrary, if I kill you — and everything is possible, you understand?" De Guiche shuddered. "If I kill you," continued De Wardes, "you will have secured Madame two mortal enemies, who will do their very utmost to ruin her."

"Oh, Monsieur," exclaimed De Guiche, furiously, "do not reckon upon my death so easily! Of the two enemies you speak of, I trust most heartily to dispose of one immediately, and of the other at the earliest opportunity."

The only reply De Wardes made was a burst of laughter, so diabolical in its sound that a superstitious man would have been terrified by it. But De Guiche was not so impressionable as that. "I think," he said, "that everything is now settled, M. de Wardes; so have the goodness to take your place first, unless you would prefer to have me do so."

"By no means," said De Wardes. "I shall be delighted to save you the slightest trouble;" and putting his horse into a gallop, he crossed the wide open space, and took his stand at the point of the circle which was immediately opposite to where De Guiche was stationed.

De Guiche remained motionless. At the distance of about a hundred paces the two adversaries were absolutely invisible to each other, being completely concealed by the thick shade of elms and chestnuts. A minute

elapsed amid the profoundest silence. At the end of the minute, each of them, in the deep shade in which he was concealed, heard the double click of the trigger, as they put the pistols at full cock. De Guiche, adopting the usual tactics, set his horse into a gallop, persuaded that he should find a twofold security in the undulatory movement and in the swiftness of his course. He charged in a straight line towards the point where, in his opinion, his adversary would be stationed, and he expected to meet De Wardes about half-way; but in this he was mistaken. He continued his course, presuming that De Wardes had not moved and was awaiting his approach. When, however, he had gone about two thirds of the distance, he saw the place suddenly illuminated, and a ball whistled by, cutting the plume of his hat in two. Nearly at the same moment, and as if the flash of the first shot had served to give light for the aim of the other, a second report was heard, and a second ball passed through the head of De Guiche's horse, a little below the ear. The animal fell.

These two reports proceeding from the very opposite direction to that in which he expected to find De Wardes, struck De Guiche with surprise; but as he was a man of great self-possession, he prepared himself for his horse's falling, — not so completely, however, but that his boot was caught under the animal as it fell. Very fortunately, the horse in its dying agonies moved so as to enable him to release his leg, which was not much bruised. De Guiche rose, felt himself all over, and found that he was not wounded. At the very moment when he had felt the horse tottering under him, he had placed his pistols in the holsters, afraid that the force of the fall might explode one at least, if not both of them, by which accident he would have been needlessly disarmed. Once on his feet,

he took the pistols out of the holsters, and advanced towards the spot where, by the light of the flash, he had seen De Wardes appear.

De Guiche had at the first shot accounted for his adversary's manœuvre, than which nothing could have been simpler. Instead of advancing to meet De Guiche, or remaining in his place to await his approach, De Wardes had for about fifteen paces followed the circle of shade, where he could not be seen by his adversary; and at the very moment when the latter presented his flank in his career, he had fired from the place where he stood, carefully taking his aim, and assisted instead of being inconvenienced by the horse's gallop. It has been seen that, notwithstanding the darkness, the first ball had passed hardly more than an inch above De Guiche's head. De Wardes had been so sure of his aim that he had expected to see De Guiche fall; his astonishment was extreme when, on the contrary, the rider still remained erect in his saddle. He hastened to fire his second shot; but his hand trembled, and he killed the horse instead. It would be a most fortunate chance for him if De Guiche were to remain held fast under the animal. Before he could have freed himself, De Wardes would have loaded his pistol for his third shot and had De Guiche at his mercy. But De Guiche, on the contrary, was up, and had three shots to fire.

De Guiche immediately understood the position of affairs. It would be necessary to exceed De Wardes in quickness. He advanced, therefore, so as to reach him before he should have had time to reload his pistol. De Wardes saw him approaching like a tempest. The ball was rather tight, and offered some resistance to the ramrod. To load it carelessly would be to expose himself to lose his last chance; to take the proper care in loading it

would be to lose his time, or rather it would be throwing away his life. He made his horse bound to one side. De Guiche turned also; and at the moment the horse was quiet again he fired, and the ball carried De Wardes's hat from his head. De Wardes knew that he had a moment's time at his disposal; he availed himself of it to finish loading his pistol. De Guiche, noticing that his adversary did not fall, threw the pistol he had just discharged aside, and walked straight towards De Wardes, elevating the second pistol as he did so. He had hardly proceeded more than two or three paces, when De Wardes took aim at him as he was walking, and fired. An exclamation of anger was De Guiche's answer; the count's arm contracted and dropped by his side, and the pistol fell from his grasp. De Wardes saw the count stoop down, pick up the pistol with his left hand, and again advance towards him. It was a critical moment. "I am lost," murmured De Wardes; "he is not mortally wounded." At the very moment, however, that De Guiche was about to raise his pistol against De Wardes, the head, shoulders, and limbs of the count seemed to give way all at once. He heaved a deep-drawn sigh, tottered, and fell at the feet of De Wardes's horse.

"That is all right," said De Wardes; and gathering up the reins, he struck his spurs into his horse's sides. The horse cleared the count's motionless body, and bore De Wardes rapidly back to the château. When he arrived there, he remained a quarter of an hour deliberating within himself as to the proper course to be adopted. In his impatience to leave the field of battle, he had neglected to ascertain whether De Guiche were dead or not. A double hypothesis presented itself to De Wardes's agitated mind, — either De Guiche was killed, or De Guiche was wounded only. If he were killed, why should he leave his body in

that manner to the wolves? It was a perfectly useless piece of cruelty; for if De Guiche were dead, he certainly could not breathe a syllable of what had passed. If he were not killed, why should he, De Wardes, by leaving him there uncared for, allow himself to be regarded as a savage, incapable of one generous feeling? This last consideration prevailed.

De Wardes immediately instituted inquiries for Manicamp. He was told that Manicamp had been looking for De Guiche, and not knowing where to find him, had retired to bed. De Wardes went and woke the sleeper, and related the whole affair to him, to which Manicamp listened in perfect silence, but with an expression of momentarily increasing energy, of which his face would hardly have been supposed capable. It was only when De Wardes had finished, that Manicamp uttered the words, "Let us go."

As they proceeded, Manicamp became more and more excited; and in proportion as De Wardes related the details of the affair to him, his countenance darkened. "And so," he said, when De Wardes had finished, "you think that he is dead?"

"Alas! I do."

"And you fought in that manner, without witnesses?"

"He insisted upon it."

"It is very singular."

"What do you mean by saying that it is singular?"

"That it is so very unlike M. de Guiche's disposition."

"You do not doubt my word, I suppose?"

"Hum! hum!"

"You do doubt it, then?"

"A little. But I shall doubt it more than ever, I warn you, if I find that the poor fellow is really dead."

"M. Manicamp!"

"M. de Wardes!"

"It seems that you intend to insult me."

"Just as you please. The fact is, I never could like those people who come and say to you, 'I have killed M. So-and-so in a corner; it is a great pity, but I killed him in a perfectly honorable manner.' It has a very ugly appearance, M. de Wardes."

"Silence! we have arrived."

In fact, the little open glade could now be seen, and in the open space lay the motionless body of the dead horse. To the right of the horse, upon the dark grass, with his face against the ground, the poor count lay, bathed in his blood. He had remained in the same spot, and did not even seem to have made the slightest movement. Manicamp threw himself on his knees, lifted the count in his arms, and found him quite cold, and steeped in blood. He let him gently fall again. Then, stretching out his hand and feeling all over the ground close to where the count lay, he sought until he found De Guiche's pistol.

"By Heaven!" he said, rising to his feet, pale as death, and with the pistol in his hand, "you were not mistaken; he is quite dead."

"Dead!" repeated De Wardes.

"Yes; and his pistol is still loaded," added Manicamp, feeling the pan with his finger.

"But I told you that I took aim as he was walking towards me, and fired at him at the very moment when he was aiming at me."

"Are you quite sure that you have fought with him, M. de Wardes? I confess that I am very much afraid you have assassinated him. Oh, no exclamations! You have had your three shots, and his pistol is still loaded. You have killed his horse, and he, De Guiche, one of the best marksmen in France, has not even touched either

your horse or yourself. Well, M. de Wardes, you have been very unlucky in bringing me here. All the blood in my body seems to have mounted to my head; and I verily believe that since so good an opportunity presents itself, I shall blow out your brains on the spot. So, M. de Wardes, recommend your soul to Heaven."

"M. de Manicamp, you cannot think of such a thing!"

"On the contrary, I am thinking of it very strongly."

"Would you assassinate me?"

"Without the slightest remorse, at least for the present."

"Are you a gentleman?"

"I have given a great many proofs of it."

"Let me defend my life, then, at least."

"Very likely; in order, I suppose, that you may do to me what you have done to poor De Guiche;" and Manicamp slowly raised his pistol to the height of De Wardes's breast, and with arm stretched out, and a determined scowl on his face, took a careful aim.

De Wardes did not attempt a flight; he was completely terrified. Then, in the midst of this horrible silence, which lasted about a second, but which seemed an age to De Wardes, a faint sigh was heard.

"Oh," exclaimed De Wardes, "he lives! he lives! Help, M. de Guiche! I am about to be assassinated!"

Manicamp fell back a step or two, and the two young men saw the count raise himself slowly and painfully upon one hand. Manicamp threw the pistol away a dozen paces, and ran to his friend, uttering a cry of delight. De Wardes wiped his forehead, which was bathed in a cold perspiration.

"It was time," he murmured.

"How much are you hurt?" inquired Manicamp of De Guiche, "and where?"

De Guiche showed him his mutilated hand and his chest covered with blood.

"Count," exclaimed De Wardes, "I am accused of having assassinated you; speak, I implore you, and say that I fought fairly."

"It is true," said the wounded man. "M. de Wardes fought quite fairly; and whoever may say the contrary will make me his enemy."

"Then, sir," said Manicamp, "assist me, in the first place, to carry this poor fellow back, and I will afterwards give you every satisfaction you please. Or if you are in a hurry, we can do better still: let us stanch the blood from the count's wounds here with your pocket-handkerchief and mine; and then, as there are two shots left, we can have them between us."

"Thank you," said De Wardes. "Twice already in one hour I have seen Death too close at hand to be agreeable; I don't like his look at all, and I prefer your apologies."

Manicamp burst out laughing, and De Guiche, too, in spite of his sufferings. The two young men wished to carry him, but he declared that he felt himself quite strong enough to walk alone. The ball had broken his ring-finger and his little finger, and then had glanced along his side, but without penetrating deeply into his chest. It was the pain rather than the seriousness of the wound, therefore, which had overcome De Guiche. Manicamp passed his arm under one of the count's shoulders, and De Wardes did the same with the other; and in this way they brought him back to Fontainebleau, to the house of the same doctor who had been present at the death of the Franciscan, Aramis's predecessor.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE KING'S SUPPER.

THE king, meanwhile, had sat down to the supper-table, and the not very large number of guests invited for that day had taken their seats, after the usual gesture intimating the royal permission to be seated. At this period of Louis XIV.'s reign, although etiquette was not governed by the strict regulations which subsequently were adopted, the French Court had entirely thrown aside the traditions of good-fellowship and patriarchal affability which still existed in the time of Henry IV., and which the suspicious mind of Louis XIII. had gradually replaced by the ceremonial semblance of a grandeur which he despaired of being able fully to realize.

The king, then, was seated alone at a small separate table, which, like the desk of a president, overlooked the adjoining tables. Although we say a small table, we must not omit to add that this small table was yet the largest one there. Moreover, it was the one on which were placed the greatest number and variety of dishes, — consisting of fish, game, meat, fruit, vegetables, and preserves. The king was young and vigorous, very fond of hunting, addicted to all violent exercises of the body, and possessed, besides, like all the members of the Bourbon family, a rapid digestion and an appetite speedily renewed. Louis XIV. was a formidable table-companion. He delighted to criticise his cooks; but when he honored them by praise and commendation, the honor was overwhelming. The king began by eating several kinds of

soup, either mixed together or taken separately. He intermingled, or rather he isolated, the soups with glasses of old wine. He ate quickly and somewhat greedily.

Porthos, who from the beginning had out of respect been waiting for a jog of D'Artagnan's elbow, seeing the king make such rapid progress, turned to the musketeer and said in a low tone, "It seems as if one might go on now; his Majesty is very encouraging in the example he sets. Look!"

"The king eats," said D'Artagnan, "but he talks at the same time. Try to manage matters in such a manner that if he should happen to address a remark to you, he would not find you with your mouth full, for that would be very awkward."

"The best way, in that case," said Porthos, "is to eat no supper at all. And yet I am very hungry, I admit; and everything looks and smells most inviting, as if appealing to all my senses at once."

"Don't for a moment think of not eating," said D'Artagnan; "that would put his Majesty out terribly. The king has a habit of saying that he who works well eats well, and he does not like to have people eat daintily at his table."

"But how can I avoid having my mouth full if I eat?" said Porthos.

"All you have to do," replied the captain of the Musketeers, "is simply to swallow what you have in it whenever the king does you the honor to address a remark to you."

"Very good," said Porthos; and from that moment he began to eat with a well-bred enthusiasm.

The king occasionally looked at the different persons who were at table with him, and as a connoisseur could appreciate the different dispositions of his guests.

"M. du Vallon!" he said.

Porthos was enjoying a ragout of hare, and swallowed half of the back. His name pronounced in such a manner made him start, and by a vigorous effort of his gullet he absorbed the whole mouthful.

"Sire," replied Porthos, in a stifled voice, but sufficiently intelligible, nevertheless.

"Let that fillet of lamb be handed to M. du Vallon," said the king. "Do you like browned meats, M. du Vallon?"

"Sire, I like everything," replied Porthos.

D'Artagnan whispered, "Everything your Majesty sends me."

Porthos repeated, "Everything your Majesty sends me," — an observation which the king apparently received with great satisfaction.

"People eat well who work well," replied the king, delighted to have opposite him a guest of Porthos's capacity. Porthos received the dish of lamb, and put a portion of it on his plate.

"Well?" said the king.

"Exquisite," said Porthos, calmly.

"Have you as good mutton in your part of the country, M. du Vallon?" continued the king.

"Sire," said Porthos, "I believe that from my own province, as everywhere else, the best of everything is sent to Paris for your Majesty's use; but, on the other hand, I do not eat mutton in the same way your Majesty does."

"Ah! and how do you eat it?"

"Generally, I have a lamb dressed quite whole."

"Quite whole?"

"Yes, Sire."

"In what manner, then?"

"In this, Sire: my cook, who is a German, first stuffs the lamb in question with small sausages which he procures from Strasburg, forcemeat-balls which he procures from Troyes, and larks which he procures from Pithiviers; by some means or other, with which I am not acquainted, he bones the lamb as he would bone a fowl, leaving the skin on, however, which forms a brown crust all over the animal. When it is cut in beautiful slices, in the same way that one would cut an enormous sausage, a rose-colored gravy issues forth, which is as agreeable to the eye as it is exquisite to the palate;" and Porthos finished by smacking his lips.

The king opened his eyes with delight, and, while cutting some of the *faisan en daube*, which was handed to him, he said: "That is a dish I should very much like to taste, M. du Vallon. Is it possible? — a whole lamb!"

"Yes, Sire."

"Pass those pheasants to M. du Vallon; I perceive that he is a connoisseur."

The order was obeyed. Then, continuing the conversation, he said, "And you do not find the lamb too fat?"

"No, Sire; the fat falls down at the same time that the gravy does, and swims on the surface; then the servant who carves removes the fat with a silver spoon, which I have had made expressly for that purpose."

"Where do you reside?" inquired the king.

"At Pierrefonds, Sire."

"At Pierrefonds; where is that, M. du Vallon, — near Belle-Isle?"

"Oh, no, Sire; Pierrefonds is in the Soissonnais."

"I thought that you alluded to the mutton on account of the salt marshes."

"No, Sire; I have marshes which are not salt, it is true, but which are not the less valuable on that account."

The king had now arrived at the *entrées*, but without losing sight of Porthos, who continued to play his part in his best manner.

"You have an excellent appetite, M. du Vallon," said the king, "and you make an admirable table-companion."

"Ah, Sire, if your Majesty were ever to pay a visit to Pierrefonds, we would both of us eat our lamb together; for your appetite is not an indifferent one, by any means."

D'Artagnan gave Porthos a severe kick under the table, which made Porthos color up.

"At your Majesty's present happy age," said Porthos, in order to repair the mistake he had made, "I was in the Musketeers, and nothing could ever satisfy me then. Your Majesty has an excellent appetite, as I have already had the honor of mentioning, but you select what you eat with too much refinement to be called a great eater."

The king seemed charmed at his guest's politeness.

"Will you try some of these creams?" he said to Porthos.

"Sire, your Majesty treats me with far too much kindness to prevent me from speaking the whole truth."

"Pray do so, M. du Vallon."

"Well, Sire, with regard to sweet dishes, I recognize only pastry, and even that should be rather solid; all these frothy substances swell my stomach, and occupy a space which seems to me to be too precious to be so badly tenanted."

"Ah, Messieurs," said the king, indicating Porthos by a gesture, "here is indeed a perfect model of gastronomy. It was in such a manner that our fathers, who so well knew what good living was, used to eat; while we," added his Majesty, "can do nothing but trifle with our food;"

and as he spoke he took a fresh plate of chicken, with ham, while Porthos attacked a ragout of partridges and land-rails.

The cup-bearer filled his Majesty's glass to the brim. "Give M. du Vallon some of my wine," said the king. This was one of the greatest honors of the royal table.

D'Artagnan pressed his friend's knee. "If you can only manage to swallow the half of that boar's head I see yonder," said he to Porthos, "I shall believe that you will be a duke and a peer within the next twelvemonth."

"Presently," said Porthos, phlegmatically; "I shall come to it by and by."

In fact it was not long before it came to the boar's turn, for the king seemed to take a pleasure in urging on this famous guest. He did not pass any of the dishes to Porthos until he had tasted them himself, and he accordingly took some of the boar's head. Porthos showed that he could keep pace with his sovereign; and instead of eating the half, as D'Artagnan had told him, he ate three fourths of it. "It is impossible," said the king in an undertone, "that a gentleman who eats so good a supper every day and who has such beautiful teeth can be otherwise than the most praiseworthy man in my kingdom."

"Do you hear?" said D'Artagnan in his friend's ear.

"Yes; I think I am rather in favor," said Porthos, balancing himself on his chair.

"Oh, you are in luck's way!"

The king and Porthos continued to eat in the same manner, to the great satisfaction of the other guests, some of whom from emulation had attempted to follow them, but had been obliged to give up on the way. The king soon began to get flushed, and the reaction of the blood to his face announced that the moment of repletion had arrived. It was then that Louis XIV., instead of becom-

ing gay and cheerful, as most good livers generally do, became dull, melancholy, and taciturn. Porthos, on the contrary, was lively and communicative. D'Artagnan's foot had more than once to remind him of this peculiarity of the king. The dessert now made its appearance. The king had ceased to think anything further of Porthos; he turned his eyes anxiously towards the entrance-door, and was heard occasionally to inquire how it happened that M. de Saint-Aignan was so long in arriving. At last, at the moment when his Majesty was finishing a pot of preserved plums with a deep sigh, M. de Saint-Aignan appeared. The king's eyes, which had become somewhat dull, immediately began to sparkle. The count advanced towards the king's table, and Louis rose at his approach. Everybody rose at the same time, — even Porthos, who was just finishing an almond cake which might have made the jaws of a crocodile stick together. The supper was over.

CHAPTER XXII.

AFTER SUPPER.

The king took Saint-Aignan by the arm, and passed into the adjoining room. "What has detained you, Count?" said the king.

"I was bringing the answer, Sire," replied the count.

"She has taken a long time to reply to what I wrote her."

"Sire, your Majesty has deigned to write in verse, and Mademoiselle de la Vallière wished to repay your Majesty in the same coin, — that is to say, in gold."

"Verses, De Saint-Aignan!" exclaimed the king, in ecstasy; "give them to me at once!" and Louis broke the seal of a little letter, enclosing the verses which history has preserved entire for us, and which are more meritorious in intention than in execution. Such as they were, however, the king was enchanted with them, and exhibited his satisfaction by unequivocal transports of delight; but the universal silence which reigned in the rooms warned Louis, so sensitively particular with regard to good breeding, that his delight might give rise to various interpretations. He turned aside and put the note in his pocket, and then advancing a few steps, which brought him again to the threshold of the door near his guests, said, "M. du Vallon, I have seen you to-day with the greatest pleasure, and my pleasure will be equally great to see you again." Porthos bowed as the Colossus of Rhodes might have done, and retired from the room with his face towards

the king. "M. d'Artagnan," continued the king, "you will await my orders in the gallery; I am obliged to you for having made me acquainted with M. du Vallon. Messieurs," addressing himself to the other guests, "I return to Paris to-morrow, on account of the departure of the Spanish and Dutch ambassadors. Until to-morrow, then!"

The apartment was immediately cleared of the guests. The king took Saint-Aignan by the arm, made him read La Vallière's verses over again, and said, "What do you think of them?"

"Charming, Sire."

"They charm me, in fact; and if they were known —"

"Oh! the professional poets would be jealous of them; but they will never know them."

"Did you give her mine?"

"Oh, Sire, she positively devoured them!"

"They were very weak, I am afraid."

"That is not what Mademoiselle de la Vallière said of them."

"Do you think that she was pleased with them?"

"I am sure of it, Sire."

"I must answer, then."

"Oh, Sire, immediately after supper? Your Majesty will fatigue yourself."

"I believe that you are right; study after eating is very injurious."

"The labor of a poet especially so; and besides, at this moment great excitement prevails at Mademoiselle de la Vallière's."

"What do you mean?"

"With her, as with all the other ladies of the court."

"Why?"

"On account of poor De Guiche's accident."

"Has anything serious happened to De Guiche, then?'

"Yes, Sire, he has one hand nearly destroyed, and a hole in his breast; in fact, he is dying."

"Good heavens! who told you that?"

"Manicamp brought him back just now to the house of a doctor here in Fontainebleau, and the rumor soon reached us all here."

"Brought back! Poor De Guiche; and how did it happen?"

"Ah, Sire, that is the very question, — how did it happen?"

"You say that in a very singular manner, De Saint-Aignan. Give me the details. What does he himself say?"

"He says nothing, Sire; but others do."

"What others?"

"Those who brought him back, Sire."

"Who are they?"

"I do not know, Sire; but M. de Manicamp knows. M. de Manicamp is one of his friends."

"As everybody is, indeed," said the king.

"Oh, no," returned De Saint-Aignan, "you are mistaken, Sire; every one is not precisely a friend of M. de Guiche."

"How do you know that?"

"Does your Majesty require me to explain myself?"

"Certainly I do."

"Well, Sire, I believe I have heard something said about a quarrel between two gentlemen."

"When?"

"This very evening, before your Majesty's supper was served."

"That can hardly be. I have issued such stringent and severe ordinances with respect to duelling, that no one, I presume, would dare to disobey them."

"In that case Heaven preserve me from excusing any one!" exclaimed De Saint-Aignan. "Your Majesty commanded me to speak, and I speak."

"Tell me, then, in what way the Comte de Guiche has been wounded?"

"Sire, it is said to have been at a boar-hunt."

"This evening?"

"Yes, Sire."

"One of his hands shattered, and a hole in his breast! Who was at the hunt with M. de Guiche?"

"I do not know, Sire; but M. de Manicamp knows, or ought to know."

"You are concealing something from me, De Saint-Aignan."

"Nothing, Sire, I assure you."

"Then explain to me how the accident happened; was it a musket that burst?"

"Very likely, Sire. But yet, on reflection, it could hardly have been that, for De Guiche's pistol was found close by him still loaded."

"His pistol? But a man does not go to a boar-hunt with a pistol."

"Sire, it is also said that De Guiche's horse was killed, and that the horse's body is still to be found in the clearing."

"His horse? De Guiche go on horseback to a boar-hunt! De Saint-Aignan, I do not understand a thing of what you have been telling me. Where did the affair happen?"

"At the circle, in the Rochin woods."

"That will do. Call M. d'Artagnan!"

De Saint-Aignan obeyed, and the musketeer entered.

"M. d'Artagnan," said the king, "you will leave this place by the little door of the private staircase."

"Yes, Sire."

"You will mount your horse."

"Yes, Sire."

"And you will proceed to the circle of the Rochin woods. Do you know the spot?"

"Yes, Sire. I have fought there twice."

"What!" exclaimed the king, amazed at the reply.

"Under the edicts, Sire, of Cardinal Richelieu," returned D'Artagnan, with his usual impassibility.

"That is very different, Monsieur. You will therefore go there, and examine the locality very carefully. A man has been wounded there, and you will find a horse lying dead. You will tell me what your opinion is upon the whole affair."

"Very good, Sire."

"Of course it is your own opinion I wish to have, and not that of any one else."

"You shall have it in an hour's time, Sire."

"I prohibit your speaking with any one, whoever he may be."

"Except with the person who must give me a lantern," said D'Artagnan.

"Oh, that is a matter of course!" said the king, laughing at the liberty which he tolerated in no one but his captain of Musketeers.

D'Artagnan left by the little staircase.

"Now, let my physician be sent for," said Louis.

Ten minutes afterwards the king's physician arrived, quite out of breath.

"You will go, Monsieur," said the king to him, "with M. de Saint-Aignan wherever he may take you; you will render me an account of the condition of the patient you may see in the house to which you will be taken."

The physician obeyed without a remark, as at that

time people were beginning to obey Louis XIV., and left the room preceding De Saint-Aignan.

"Do you, De Saint-Aignan, send Manicamp to me before the physician can possibly have spoken to him;" and De Saint-Aignan left in his turn.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOW D'ARTAGNAN DISCHARGED THE MISSION WITH WHICH THE KING HAD INTRUSTED HIM.

While the king was engaged in making these last-mentioned arrangements in order to ascertain the truth, D'Artagnan, without losing a second, ran to the stable, took down the lantern, saddled his horse himself, and proceeded towards the place which his Majesty had indicated. According to the promise he had made, he had neither seen nor met any one; and as we have observed, he had carried his scruples so far as to do without the assistance of the helpers in the stables altogether. D'Artagnan was one of those who in moments of difficulty pride themselves on increasing their own value. By dint of hard galloping, he in less than five minutes reached the wood, fastened his horse to the first tree he came to, and went into the broad open space on foot. He then began to inspect most carefully, on foot and with his lantern in his hand, the whole surface of the circle, — went forward, turned back again, measured, examined, — and after half an hour's minute inspection returned silently to his horse, and pursued his way in deep reflection and at a foot-pace to Fontainebleau. Louis was waiting in his cabinet; he was alone, and with a pencil was scribbling on paper certain lines which D'Artagnan at the first glance recognized as being very unequal and very much scratched up. He concluded that they must be verses. The king raised his

head and perceived D'Artagnan. "Well, Monsieur," he said, "do you bring me any news?"

"Yes, Sire."

"What have you seen?"

"So far as probability goes, Sire—" D'Artagnan began to reply.

"It was certainty I requested of you."

"I will approach that as nearly as I possibly can. The weather was very well adapted for investigations of the character which I have just made; it has been raining this evening, and the roads are wet and muddy—"

"Well, the result, M. d'Artagnan?"

"Sire, your Majesty told me that there was a horse lying dead in the cross-road of the Rochin woods, and I began, therefore, by studying the roads. I say the roads, because the centre of the circle is reached by four separate roads. The one that I myself took was the only one that presented any fresh tracks. Two horses had followed it side by side; their eight feet were marked very distinctly in the clay. One of the riders was more impatient than the other, for the footprints of the one were invariably in advance of the other by about half a horse's length."

"Are you quite sure they came together?" said the king.

"Yes, Sire. The horses are two rather large animals of equal pace, — horses well used to manœuvres of all kinds, for they wheeled round the barrier of the circle together."

"What next, Monsieur?"

"The two riders paused there for a minute, no doubt to arrange the conditions of the engagement; the horses grew restless and impatient. One of the riders spoke, while the other listened and seemed to have contented himself by simply answering. His horse pawed the ground, which proves that his attention was so taken up by listening that he let the bridle fall from his hand."

"A hostile meeting did take place, then?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Continue! You are a most accurate observer."

"One of the two cavaliers remained where he was standing,—the one, in fact, who had been listening; the other crossed the open space, and at first placed himself directly opposite to his adversary. Then the one who had remained stationary crossed the circle at a gallop, about two thirds of its length, thinking that he was riding upon his opponent; but the latter had followed the circumference of the wood."

"You are ignorant of their names, I suppose?"

"Completely so, Sire. Only he who followed the circumference of the wood was mounted on a black horse."

"How do you know that?"

"I found a few hairs of his tail among the brambles which bordered the sides of the ditch."

"Go on!"

"As for the other horse, there can be no trouble in describing him, since he was left dead on the field of battle."

"What was the cause of his death?"

"A ball which had passed through his temple."

"Was the ball that of a pistol or of a gun?"

"It was a pistol-bullet, Sire. Besides, the manner in which the horse was wounded explained to me the tactics of the man who had killed it. He had followed the circumference of the wood in order to take his adversary on the flank. Moreover, I followed his foot-tracks on the grass."

"The tracks of the black horse, do you mean?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Go on, M. d'Artagnan!"

"As your Majesty now perceives the position of the two adversaries, I will, for a moment, leave the cavalier who had remained stationary for the one who started off at a gallop."

"Do so."

"The horse of the cavalier who charged was killed on the spot."

"How do you know that?"

"The cavalier had not time even to throw himself off his horse, and so fell with it. I observed the impression of his leg, which with a great effort he was enabled to extricate from under the horse. The spur, pressed down by the weight of the animal, had ploughed up the ground."

"Very good; and what did he do when he got up again?"

"He walked straight up to his adversary."

"Who still remained upon the verge of the wood?"

"Yes, Sire. Then, having reached a favorable distance, he stopped firmly, — for the impression of both his heels are left in the ground quite close to each other, — fired, and missed his adversary."

"How do you know that he did not hit him?"

"I found a hat with a ball through it."

"Ah, a proof, then!" exclaimed the king.

"Insufficient, Sire," replied D'Artagnan, coldly. "It is a hat without any letters indicating its ownership, without arms; it has a red feather, as all hats have; the lace, even, had nothing to distinguish it."

"Did the man with the hat through which the bullet had passed fire a second time?"

"Oh, Sire, he had already fired twice."

"How did you ascertain that?"

"I found the waddings of the pistol."

"And what became of the bullet which did not kill the horse?"

"It cut in two the feather of the hat belonging to him against whom it was directed, and broke a small birch at the other end of the clearing."

"In that case, then, the man on the black horse was disarmed, while his adversary had still one more shot to fire."

"Sire, while the dismounted rider was getting up, the other was reloading his pistol. Only, he was much agitated while he was loading it, and his hand trembled greatly."

"How do you know that?"

"Half the charge fell to the ground; and he threw the ramrod aside, not having time to replace it in the pistol."

"M. d'Artagnan, what you tell me is marvellous."

"It is only close observation, Sire, and the commonest scout would do as much."

"The whole scene is before me from the manner in which you relate it."

"I have, in fact, reconstructed it in my own mind, with merely a few alterations."

"And now," said the king, "let us return to the dismounted cavalier. You were saying that he had walked up to his adversary while the latter was reloading his pistol."

"Yes; but at the very moment he himself was taking aim, the other fired."

"Oh!" said the king; "and the shot?"

"The shot told terribly, Sire; the dismounted cavalier fell upon his face, after having staggered forward three or four paces."

"Where was he hit?"

"In two places, — in the first place, in his right hand, and then, by the same bullet, in his chest."

"But how could you ascertain that?" inquired the king, full of admiration.

"By a very simple means: the butt-end of the pistol was covered with blood, and the trace of the bullet could be observed with fragments of a broken ring. The wounded man, in all probability, had the ring-finger and the little finger carried away."

"So far as the hand goes, I have nothing to say; but the chest!"

"Sire, there were two small pools of blood, at a distance of about two feet and a half from each other. At one of these pools of blood the grass was torn up by the clinched hand; at the other the grass was simply pressed down by the weight of the body."

"Poor De Guiche!" exclaimed the king.

"Ah! it was M. de Guiche, then?" said the musketeer, very quietly. "I suspected it, but did not venture to mention it to your Majesty."

"And what made you suspect it?"

"I recognized the De Grammont arms upon the holsters of the dead horse."

"And you think that he is seriously wounded?"

"Very seriously, since he fell immediately, and remained a long time in the same place; however, he was able to walk, as he left the spot supported by two friends."

"You met him returning, then?"

"No; but I observed the footprints of three men. The one on the right and the one on the left walked freely and easily, but the one in the middle dragged his feet as he walked; besides, he left traces of blood at every step he took."

"Now, Monsieur, since you saw the combat so dis-

tinctly that not a single detail seems to have escaped you, tell me something about De Guiche's adversary."

"Oh, Sire, I do not know him."

"And yet you see everything so clearly."

"Yes, Sire," said D'Artagnan, "I see everything, but I do not tell all I see; and since the poor devil has escaped, your Majesty will permit me to say that I do not intend to denounce him."

"And yet he is guilty, since he has fought a duel, Monsieur."

"Not guilty in my eyes, Sire," said D'Artagnan, coldly.

"Monsieur!" exclaimed the king, "are you aware of what you are saying?"

"Perfectly, Sire; but, according to my notion, a man who fights well is a brave man; — such, at least, is my own opinion. But your Majesty may have another; that is very natural, — you are the master here."

"M. d'Artagnan, I ordered you, however — "

D'Artagnan interrupted the king by a respectful gesture. "You ordered me, Sire, to gather what particulars I could respecting a hostile meeting that had taken place; those particulars you have. If you order me to arrest M. de Guiche's adversary, I will obey; but do not order me to denounce him to you, for in that case I will not obey."

"Very well! Arrest him, then!"

"Give me his name, Sire."

The king stamped his foot angrily; but after a moment's reflection he said, "You are right, — ten times, twenty times, a hundred times right."

"That is my opinion, Sire; I am happy that at the same time it accords with your Majesty's."

"One word more. Who carried assistance to De Guiche?"

"I do not know."

"But you speak of two men. There was a second, then."

"There was no second. Nay, more than that, when M. de Guiche fell his adversary fled without even giving him any assistance."

"The miserable coward!"

"The consequence of your ordinances, Sire. If a man has fought well and fairly, and has already escaped one chance of death, he naturally wishes to escape a second. M. de Boutteville cannot be forgotten very easily."

"And so men turn cowards."

"No; they become prudent."

"And he has fled, then, you say?"

"Yes; and as fast as his horse could possibly carry him."

"In what direction?"

"In the direction of the château."

"What then?"

"Afterwards, as I have had the honor of telling your Majesty, two men on foot arrived, who carried M. de Guiche back with them."

"What proof have you that these men arrived after the combat?"

"A very evident proof, Sire. At the moment the encounter took place the rain had just ceased; the ground had not had time to absorb the moisture, and had consequently become damp; the footsteps sank in: but after the combat, while M. de Guiche was lying there in a fainting condition, the ground became firm again, and the footsteps made a less sensible impression."

Louis clapped his hands together in sign of admiration. "M. d'Artagnan," he said, "you are positively the cleverest man in my kingdom."

"The very thing that M. de Richelieu thought, and M. de Mazarin said, Sire."

"And now it remains for us to see whether your sagacity is in fault."

"Oh, Sire, a man may be mistaken; *errare humanum est*," said the musketeer, philosophically.

"In that case you are not human, M. d'Artagnan, for I believe you never are mistaken."

"Your Majesty said that we were going to see."

"Yes."

"In what way may I venture to ask?"

"I have sent for M. de Manicamp, and M. de Manicamp is coming."

"And M. de Manicamp knows the secret?"

"De Guiche keeps no secrets from M. de Manicamp."

D'Artagnan shook his head. "No one was present at the combat, I repeat; and unless M. de Manicamp was one of the two men who brought him back —"

"Hush!" said the king, "here he is coming; remain there and listen attentively."

"Very good, Sire," said the musketeer.

And at the same moment Manicamp and De Saint-Aignan appeared at the threshold of the door.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE ENCOUNTER.

THE king made, first to the musketeer and then to De Saint-Aignan, an imperious and significant gesture, as much as to say, "On your lives, not a word!" D'Artagnan withdrew, like a soldier, into a corner of the room; De Saint-Aignan, in his character of favorite, leaned over the back of the king's chair. Manicamp, with his right foot properly advanced, a smile upon his lips, and his white and well-formed hands gracefully disposed, advanced to make his reverence to the king, who returned the salutation by a bow.

"Good-evening, M. de Manicamp," he said.

"Your Majesty did me the honor to send for me," said Manicamp.

"Yes, in order to learn from you all the details of the unfortunate accident which has befallen the Comte de Guiche."

"Oh, Sire! it is very grievous indeed."

"You were there?"

"Not precisely so, Sire."

"But you arrived on the scene where the accident occurred a few minutes after it took place?"

"I did so, Sire, about half an hour afterwards."

"And where did the accident take place?"

"I believe, Sire, the place is called the circle of the Rochin woods."

"Oh! the rendezvous of the hunt."

"The very spot, Sire."

"Well, tell me what you know of the details of this unhappy affair, M. de Manicamp."

"Perhaps your Majesty has already been informed of them, and I fear to fatigue you by useless repetitions."

"No; do not be afraid of that!"

Manicamp looked all around him. He saw only D'Artagnan leaning with his back against the wainscot, — D'Artagnan, calm, kind, and good-natured as usual, — and De Saint-Aignan, with whom he had come, and who still leaned over the king's arm-chair with an expression of countenance equally full of good feeling. He determined, therefore, to speak out. "Your Majesty is perfectly aware," he said, "that accidents are very frequent in hunting."

"In hunting, do you say?"

"Yes, Sire, I mean when an animal is brought to bay."

"Ah!" said the king, "it was when the animal was brought to bay, then, that the accident happened."

"Why, yes, Sire," ventured Manicamp; "was your Majesty not aware of that?"

"I heard something like that," said the king, hastily, for Louis XIV. was averse to lying; "it was, then, when the animal was at bay, you say, that the accident happened?"

"Alas! Sire, unhappily, it was so."

The king paused for a moment before he inquired, "What animal was being hunted?"

"A wild boar, Sire."

"And what could possibly have possessed De Guiche to go to a wild-boar hunt by himself? That is but a clownish idea of sport, and fit only for that class of people who unlike the Maréchal de Grammont have no dogs and huntsmen to hunt as gentlemen should do."

Manicamp shrugged his shoulders. "Youth is very rash," he said sententiously.

"Well, go on!" said the king.

"At all events," continued Manicamp, not venturing to be too precipitate and hasty, and letting his words fall very slowly, one by one, just as a fen-man takes his steps in a marsh, — "at all events, Sire, poor De Guiche went hunting, — quite alone."

"Quite alone, indeed! What a sportsman! And is not M. de Guiche aware that the wild boar always stands at bay?"

"That is the very thing which really happened, Sire."

"He had some idea, then, that the beast was there?"

"Yes, Sire; some peasants had seen it among their potatoes."

"And what kind of an animal was it?"

"A short, thick beast."

"You may as well tell me, Monsieur, that De Guiche had some idea of committing suicide, for I have seen him hunt, and he is a very expert hunter. Whenever he fires at an animal brought to bay and held in check by the dogs, he takes every possible precaution, and he fires with a carbine; and on this occasion he seems to have faced the boar with pistols only." Manicamp started. "A costly pair of pistols, excellent weapons to fight a duel with a man and not with a wild boar! What absurdity!"

"There are some things, Sire, which are difficult of explanation."

"You are quite right, and the event which we are now discussing is one of those things. Go on!"

During the recital De Saint-Aignan, who perhaps would have made a sign to Manicamp to be careful what he was about, was held in check by the persistent watchfulness of the king; so that it was utterly impossible to communicate with Manicamp in any way. As for D'Artagnan, the statue of Silence at Athens was far more noisy and

far more expressive than he. Manicamp, therefore, was obliged to continue in the same way in which he had begun, and so contrived to get more and more entangled in his explanation. "Sire," he said, "this is probably how the affair happened: De Guiche was waiting to receive the boar as it rushed towards him."

"On foot or on horseback?" inquired the king.

"On horseback. He fired upon the brute and missed his aim, and then it dashed upon him."

"And the horse was killed."

"Ah! your Majesty knows that, then."

"I have been told that a horse has been found lying dead in the cross-roads of the Rochin woods, and I presumed it was De Guiche's horse."

"It was his, indeed, Sire."

"Well, so much for the horse, and now for De Guiche."

"De Guiche, once down, was attacked and worried by the wild boar, and wounded in the hand and in the chest."

"It is a horrible accident, but it must be admitted that it was De Guiche's own fault. How could he possibly have gone to hunt such an animal merely armed with pistols? He must have forgotten the fable of Adonis."

Manicamp rubbed his ear in seeming perplexity. "Very true," he said; "it was very imprudent."

"Can you explain it, M. Manicamp?"

"Sire, what is written is written!"

"Ah! you are a fatalist."

Manicamp looked very uncomfortable and ill at ease. "I am angry with you, M. Manicamp," continued the king.

"With me, Sire?"

"Yes. How was it that you, who are De Guiche's

intimate friend, and who know that he is subject to such acts of folly, did not stop him in time?"

Manicamp hardly knew what to do; the tone in which the king spoke was not exactly that of a credulous man. On the other hand, the tone did not indicate any particular severity, nor did it have the insistence of a cross-examination. There was more of raillery in it than of menace.

"And you say, then," continued the king, "that it was positively Guiche's horse that was found dead?"

"Quite positive, Sire."

"Did that astonish you?"

"No, Sire; for your Majesty will remember that at the last hunt M. de Saint-Maure had a horse killed under him, and in the same way."

"Yes, but that one was ripped open."

"Of course, Sire."

"Had Guiche's horse been ripped open like M. de Saint-Maure's horse, that would not have astonished me, indeed."

Manicamp opened his eyes very wide.

"But what astonishes me," continued the king, "is that Guiche's horse, instead of having its belly ripped open, had its skull broken."

Manicamp was in great confusion.

"Am I mistaken?" resumed the king; "was it not in the temple that Guiche's horse was struck? You must admit, M. de Manicamp, that that is a very singular wound."

"You are aware, Sire, that the horse is a very intelligent animal, and he endeavored to defend himself."

"But a horse defends himself with his hind feet, and not with his head."

"In that case the terrified horse might have been knocked down," said Manicamp; "and the boar, you understand, Sire, the boar —"

"Oh, I understand that perfectly, so far as the horse is concerned; but how about his rider?"

"Well, that, too, is simple enough. The boar left the horse and attacked the rider, and, as I have already had the honor of informing your Majesty, shattered De Guiche's hand at the very moment he was about to discharge his second pistol at him, and then, with a blow of his tusk, made that terrible hole in his chest."

"Nothing can possibly be more likely; really, M. de Manicamp, you are wrong in placing so little confidence in your own eloquence, and you can tell a story most admirably."

"Your Majesty is exceedingly kind," said Manicamp, bowing in the most embarrassed manner.

"From this day henceforth, I shall prohibit any gentleman attached to my court from going to a similar encounter. Really, one might just as well permit duelling."

Manicamp started, and moved as if he were about to withdraw. "Is your Majesty satisfied?" he inquired.

"Delighted; but do not withdraw yet, M. de Manicamp," said Louis, — "I have business with you."

"Well, well!" thought D'Artagnan, "there is another who is not up to our mark;" and he uttered a sigh which might signify, "Oh! the men of our stamp, where are they now?"

At this moment an usher lifted the curtain before the door, and announced the king's physician.

"Ah!" exclaimed Louis, "here comes M. Valot, who has just been to see M. de Guiche. We shall now hear news of the wounded man."

Manicamp felt more uncomfortable than ever. "In this way, at least," added the king, "our conscience will be quite clear;" and he looked at D'Artagnan, who did not seem in the slightest degree discomposed.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PHYSICIAN.

M. VALOT entered. The position of the different persons present was precisely the same, — the king was seated, De Saint-Aignan was still leaning over the back of his arm-chair, D'Artagnan stood with his back against the wall, and Manicamp was still standing.

"Well, M. Valot," said the king, "have you obeyed my directions?"

"With the greatest alacrity, Sire."

"You went to your colleague's house in Fontainebleau?"

"Yes, Sire."

"And you found M. de Guiche there?"

"I did, Sire."

"What state was he in? Speak unreservedly."

"In a very sad state, indeed, Sire."

"The wild boar did not quite devour him, however?"

"Devour whom?"

"Guiche."

"What wild boar?"

"The boar that wounded him."

"M. de Guiche wounded by a boar?"

"So it is said, at least."

"By a poacher, rather, or by a jealous husband or an ill-used lover, who in order to be revenged fired upon him."

"What is that you say, M. Valot? Were not M. de Guiche's wounds produced by defending himself against a wild boar?"

"M. de Guiche's wounds were produced by a pistol-bullet which broke his ring-finger and the little finger of the right hand, and afterwards buried itself in the intercostal muscles of the chest."

"A bullet! Are you sure M. de Guiche has been wounded by a bullet?" exclaimed the king, pretending to look much surprised.

"Indeed I am, Sire," said Valot, — "so sure, in fact, that here it is;" and he presented to the king a half-flattened bullet, which the king looked at, but did not touch.

"Did he have that in his chest, poor fellow?" he asked.

"Not precisely. The ball did not penetrate, but was flattened, as you see, either upon the guard of the pistol or upon the right side of the breast-bone."

"Good heavens!" said the king, seriously; "you said nothing to me about all this, M. de Manicamp."

"Sire —"

"What does all this mean, then, — this invention about hunting a wild boar at nightfall? Come, speak, Monsieur!"

"Ah! Sire —"

"It seems, then, that you are right," said the king, turning round towards his captain of Musketeers, "and that a duel actually took place."

The king possessed, to a greater extent than any one else, the faculty, enjoyed by the great in power or position, of compromising and estranging those beneath him. Manicamp darted a reproachful look at the musketeer.

D'Artagnan understood the look at once, and, not wishing to remain beneath the weight of such an accusation, advanced a step forward, and said: "Sire, your Majesty

commanded me to go and explore the place where the cross-roads meet in the Rochin woods, and to report to you, according to my own ideas, what had taken place there. I submitted my observations to you, but without denouncing any one. It was your Majesty yourself who was the first to name M. le Comte de Guiche."

"Well, Monsieur, well," said the king, haughtily, "you have done your duty, and I am satisfied with you; that ought to be sufficient for you. But you, M. de Manicamp, have failed in yours, for you have told me a falsehood."

"A falsehood, Sire! The expression is a hard one."

"Find another instead, then."

"Sire, I will not attempt to do so. I have already been unfortunate enough to displease your Majesty, and it will in every respect be far better for me to accept most humbly any reproaches you may think proper to address to me."

"You are right, Monsieur; whoever conceals the truth from me risks my displeasure."

"Sometimes, Sire, one is ignorant of the truth."

"No further falsehood, Monsieur, or I double the punishment."

Manicamp bowed and turned pale. D'Artagnan again made another step forward, determined to interfere, if the still increasing anger of the king attained certain limits.

"You see, Monsieur," continued the king, "that it is useless to deny the thing any longer. M. de Guiche has fought a duel."

"I do not deny it, Sire; and it would have been generous in your Majesty not to have forced a gentleman to tell a falsehood."

"Forced! Who forced you?"

"Sire, M. de Guiche is my friend; your Majesty has for

bidden duels under pain of death; a falsehood might save my friend's life, and I told it."

"Good!" murmured D'Artagnan; "an excellent fellow, upon my word!"

"Instead of telling a falsehood, Monsieur, you should have prevented him from fighting," said the king.

"Oh, Sire, your Majesty, who is the most accomplished gentleman in France, knows quite as well as any one that we have never considered M. de Boutteville dishonored for having suffered death on the Place de Grève. That which does dishonor a man is not meeting his executioner, but avoiding his enemy."

"Well, Monsieur, that may be so," said Louis XIV.; "I am very desirous of suggesting a means of your making amends for everything."

"If it be a means of which a gentleman may avail himself, I shall most eagerly do so, Sire."

"The name of M. de Guiche's adversary?"

"Oh!" murmured D'Artagnan, "are we going to take Louis XIII. as a model?"

"Sire!" said Manicamp, with an accent of reproach.

"You will not name him, it appears, then?" said the king.

"Sire, I do not know him."

"Bravo!" murmured D'Artagnan.

"M. de Manicamp, hand your sword to the captain."

Manicamp bowed very gracefully, unbuckled his sword, smiling as he did so, and handed it to the musketeer to take. But De Saint-Aignan advanced hurriedly between him and D'Artagnan. "Sire," he said, "will your Majesty permit me to say a word?"

"Do so," said the king, delighted perhaps at the bottom of his heart to have some one step between him and the wrath which he felt had carried him too far.

"Manicamp, you are a brave man, and the king will

appreciate your conduct; but to wish to serve your friends too well, is to destroy them. Manicamp, you know the name the king asks you for?"

"It is perfectly true; I do know it."

"You will tell it, then?"

"If I felt that I ought to have told it, I should have already done so."

"Then I will tell it, for I am not so extremely sensitive on such points of honor as you are."

"You are at liberty to do so; but it seems to me, however —"

"Oh, a truce to magnanimity! I will not permit you to go to the Bastille in that way. Do you speak; or I will."

Manicamp was keen-witted enough, and perfectly understood that he had done quite sufficient to produce a good opinion of his conduct; it was now only a question of persevering in such a manner as to regain the good graces of the king. "Speak, Monsieur!" he said to De Saint-Aignan. "I have on my own behalf done all that my conscience told me to do, and it must have been very importunate," he added, turning towards the king, "since its dictates led me to disobey your Majesty's commands; but your Majesty will forgive me, I hope, when you learn that I was anxious to preserve the honor of a lady."

"Of a lady?" asked the king, with some uneasiness.

"Yes, Sire."

"A lady was the cause of this duel?"

Manicamp bowed.

The king rose and approached Manicamp. "If the position of the lady in question warrants it," he said, "I shall not complain of your having acted with so much circumspection; quite the contrary, indeed."

"Sire, everything which concerns your Majesty's house-

hold, or the household of your Majesty's brother, is of importance in my eyes."

"My brother's household?" repeated Louis XIV., with a slight hesitation. "The cause of this duel was a lady belonging to my brother's household, do you say?"

"Or to Madame's."

"Ah! to Madame's?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Well — and this lady?"

"Is one of the maids of honor of the household of her royal Highness Madame la Duchesse d'Orléans."

"For whom M. de Guiche fought, do you say?"

"Yes, Sire; and this time I tell no falsehood."

Louis seemed restless and anxious. "Messieurs," he said, turning towards the spectators of this scene, "will you have the goodness to retire for a moment? I wish to be alone with M. de Manicamp. I know he has some very important communications to make for his own justification, and that he will not venture to give them before witnesses. Put up your sword, M. de Manicamp!"

Manicamp returned his sword to his belt.

"The fellow decidedly has his wits about him," murmured the musketeer, taking Saint-Aignan by the arm and withdrawing with him.

"He will get out of it," said the latter in D'Artagnan's ear.

"And with honor, too, Count."

Manicamp cast a glance of acknowledgment at Saint-Aignan and the captain, which passed unnoticed by the king.

"Well, well," said D'Artagnan, as he crossed the threshold, "I had an indifferent opinion of the new generation. Indeed, I was mistaken, after all, and these young fellows have some good in them."

Valot preceded the favorite and the captain, leaving the king and Manicamp alone in the cabinet.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHEREIN D'ARTAGNAN PERCEIVES THAT IT WAS HE WHO WAS MISTAKEN, AND MANICAMP WHO WAS RIGHT.

THE king, determined to be satisfied that no one was listening, went himself to the door, and then returned quickly and placed himself opposite to Manicamp. "And now that we are alone, M. de Manicamp, explain yourself!"

"With the greatest frankness, Sire," replied the young man.

"And in the first place, pray understand," added the king, "that there is nothing to which I personally attach greater importance than the honor of any lady."

"That is the very reason, Sire, why I endeavored to study your delicacy of feeling."

"Yes, I understand it all now. You say that it was one of my sister-in-law's maids of honor who was the subject of dispute, and that the person in question, Guiche's adversary, the man, in fact, whom you will not name — "

"But whom M. de Saint-Aignan will name, Sire."

"Yes; you say, however, that this man has offended some one belonging to the household of Madame."

"Yes, Sire, Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Ah!" said the king, as if he had expected the name, and yet as if its announcement had caused him a sudden pang, — "ah! it was Mademoiselle de la Vallière who was insulted."

"I do not say precisely that she was insulted, Sire."

"But at all events — "

"I merely say that she was spoken of in terms far from respectful."

"A man dares to speak in disrespectful terms of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and yet you refuse to tell me the name of the insulter!"

"Sire, I thought it was quite understood that your Majesty had abandoned the idea of making me denounce him."

"Perfectly true, you are right," returned the king, controlling his anger; "besides, I shall know in sufficient time the name of the man whom I shall feel it my duty to punish."

Manicamp perceived that they had returned to the question again. As for the king, he saw that he had allowed himself to be carried a little too far, and he therefore continued: "And I will punish him, not because there is any question of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, although I esteem her very highly, but because a lady was the object of the quarrel. And I intend that ladies shall be respected at my court, and that quarrels shall be put a stop to altogether."

Manicamp bowed.

"And now, M. de Manicamp," continued the king, "what was said about Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"Cannot your Majesty guess?"

"I?"

"Your Majesty can imagine the character of the jests in which young men permit themselves to indulge."

"They very probably said that she was in love with some one?" the king ventured to remark.

"Probably so."

"But Mademoiselle de la Vallière has a perfect right to love any one she pleases," said the king.

"That is the very point De Guiche maintained."

"And was it for that reason he fought?"

"Yes, Sire, for that reason alone."

The king colored. "And you do not know anything more, then?"

"In what respect, Sire?"

"In the very interesting respect to which you just now referred."

"What does your Majesty wish to know?"

"Well, for instance, the name of the man with whom La Vallière is in love, and whom De Guiche's adversary disputed her right to love."

"Sire, I know nothing — I have heard nothing — and have learned nothing, even accidentally; but De Guiche is a noble-hearted fellow, and if momentarily he substituted himself in the place of La Vallière's protector, it was because that protector was of too exalted a position to undertake her defence himself."

These words were more than transparent; they made the king blush, but this time with pleasure. He struck Manicamp gently on the shoulder.

"Well, well, M. de Manicamp, you are not only a keen-witted fellow, but a brave gentleman besides, and your friend De Guiche is a paladin quite after my own heart; you will express that to him, will you not?"

"Your Majesty forgives me, then?"

"Completely."

"And I am free?"

The king smiled and held out his hand to Manicamp, which he took and kissed respectfully. "And then," added the king, "you relate stories so charmingly."

"I, Sire!"

"You told me in the most admirable manner the particulars of the accident which happened to De Guiche. I can see the wild boar rushing out of the wood, — I can

see the horse fall down, and the boar rush from the horse to the rider. You do not simply relate a story well, Monsieur, but you positively paint its incidents."

"Sire, I think that your Majesty deigns to laugh at my expense," said Manicamp.

"On the contrary," said Louis XIV. seriously, "I have so little intention of laughing, M. de Manicamp, that I wish you to relate this adventure to every one."

"The adventure of the hunt?"

"Yes; in the same manner in which you told it to me, without changing a single word, you understand."

"Perfectly, Sire."

"And you will relate it, then?"

"Without losing a minute."

"Very well! and now summon M. d'Artagnan; I hope you are no longer afraid of him."

"Oh, Sire, from the very moment when I am sure of your Majesty's kindness towards me, I no longer fear anything!"

"Call him, then!" said the king.

Manicamp opened the door, and said, "Messieurs, the king summons you."

D'Artagnan, De Saint-Aignan, and Valot returned.

"Messieurs," said the king, "I summoned you for the purpose of saying that M. de Manicamp's explanation has entirely satisfied me."

D'Artagnan glanced at Valot and De Saint-Aignan, as much as to say, "Well, did I not tell you so?"

The king led Manicamp aside to the door, and then in a low tone said, "See that M. de Guiche takes good care of himself, and particularly that he recovers as soon as possible. I am very desirous of thanking him in the name of every lady; but let him take special care that he does not begin again."

"Were he to die a hundred times, Sire, he would begin again if your Majesty's honor were in any way called in question."

This remark was direct enough. But we have already said that the incense of flattery was very pleasing to King Louis XIV., and provided he received it, he was not very particular as to its quality.

"Very well, very well," he said, as he dismissed Manicamp, "I will see De Guiche myself, and make him listen to reason;" and as Manicamp retreated from the apartment, the king turned round towards the three spectators of this scene, and said, "Tell me, M. d'Artagnan, how does it happen that your sight is so imperfect? — you, whose eyes are generally so very good."

"My sight bad, Sire?"

"Certainly."

"It must be the case since your Majesty says so; but in what respect may I ask?"

"Why, with regard to what occurred in the Rochin woods."

"Ah!"

"Certainly. You pretend to have seen the tracks of two horses, to have detected the footprints of two men; and have described the particulars of an engagement which you assert took place. Nothing of the sort occurred, — pure illusion on your part."

"Ah!" said D'Artagnan, again.

"Exactly the same thing with the galloping to and fro of the horses, and the other indications of a struggle. It was the struggle of De Guiche against the wild boar, and nothing else; only the struggle was a long and a terrible one, it seems."

"Ah!" continued D'Artagnan.

"And when I think that for a moment I almost

believed such a mistake — but, then, you spoke with such confidence."

"In fact, Sire, I must have been very short-sighted," said D'Artagnan, with a readiness of humor which delighted the king.

"You do admit it, then?"

"Admit it, Sire! most assuredly I do."

"So that now you see the thing — "

"In quite a different light from what I saw it half an hour ago."

"And to what, then, do you attribute this difference in your opinion?"

"Oh, a very simple thing, Sire! Half an hour ago I returned from the Rochin wood, where I had nothing to light me but a wretched stable-lantern — "

"While now — "

"While now I have all the wax lights of your cabinet, and more than that, your Majesty's own eyes, which illuminate everything, like the blazing sun at noonday."

The king began to laugh, and De Saint-Aignan broke out into convulsions of merriment.

"It is precisely like M. Valot," said D'Artagnan, resuming the conversation where the king had left off; "he has been imagining all along that not only was M. de Guiche wounded by a bullet, but still more that he extracted a bullet, even, from his chest."

"Upon my word," said Valot, "I assure you — "

"Now, did you not believe that?" continued D'Artagnan.

"Yes," said Valot; "not only did I believe it, but at this very moment I would swear to it."

"Well, my dear doctor, you have dreamed it!"

"I have dreamed it!"

"M. de Guiche's wound, a mere dream; the bullet, a dream. So take my advice, and say no more about it."

"Well said," returned the king; "M. d'Artagnan's advice is very good. Do not speak of your dream to any one, M. Valot; and, upon the word of a gentleman, you will have no occasion to repent it. Good-evening, Messieurs; a very sad affair, indeed, is a wild-boar hunt!"

"A very serious thing, indeed," repeated D'Artagnan, in a loud voice, "is a wild-boar hunt!" and he repeated that remark in every room through which he passed, and left the château, taking Valot with him.

"And now that we are alone," said the king to De Saint-Aignan, "what is the name of De Guiche's adversary?"

De Saint-Aignan looked at the king.

"Oh, do not hesitate!" said the king; "you know that I must forgive."

"De Wardes," said De Saint-Aignan.

"Very good," said Louis XIV.; and then hastily retiring to his own room, he added to himself, "To forgive is not to forget."

CHAPTER XXVII.

SHOWING THE ADVANTAGE OF HAVING TWO STRINGS TO ONE'S BOW.

MANICAMP quitted the king's apartment delighted at having succeeded so well, when, just as he reached the bottom of the staircase and was about passing before a doorway, he felt some one suddenly pull him by the sleeve. He turned and recognized Montalais, who was waiting for him in the passage, and who in a very mysterious manner, with her body bent forward, and in a low tone of voice, said to him, "Monsieur, come quick, I pray you!"

"Where to, Mademoiselle?" inquired Manicamp.

"In the first place, a true knight would not have asked such a question, but would have followed without requiring any explanation."

"Well, Mademoiselle," said Manicamp, "I am quite ready to conduct myself as a true knight."

"No, it is too late, and you cannot take the credit of it. We are going to Madame's apartments; so come at once."

"Ah!" said Manicamp; "lead on, then!" and he followed Montalais, who ran before him as lightly as Galatea.

"This time," said Manicamp, as he followed his guide, "I do not think that stories about hunting expeditions would be acceptable. We will try, however, and if need be — why, if need be, we must find something else."

Montalais still ran on.

"How fatiguing it is," thought Manicamp, "to have need of one's head and legs at the same time!"

At last, however, they arrived. Madame had just finished her toilet for the night, and was in a most elegant *déshabille;* but it must be understood that she had changed her dress before she had any idea of being subjected to the emotions which agitated her. She was waiting with the most restless impatience, and Montalais and Manicamp found her standing near the door. At the sound of their approaching footsteps Madame came forward to meet them. "Ah!" she said, "at last!"

"Here is M. Manicamp," replied Montalais.

Manicamp bowed with the greatest respect. Madame signed to Montalais to withdraw, and she immediately obeyed. Madame followed her with her eyes in silence until the door closed behind her, and then turning to Manicamp said, "What is the matter? And is it true, as I am told, M. de Manicamp, that some one is lying wounded in the château?"

"Yes, Madame, unfortunately so, — M. de Guiche."

"Yes, M. de Guiche," repeated the princess. "I had, in fact, heard it rumored, but not confirmed. And so, in perfect truth, it is M. de Guiche who has met this misfortune?"

"M. de Guiche himself, Madame."

"Are you aware, M. de Manicamp," said the princess, hastily, "that the king has the strongest antipathy to duels?"

"Perfectly so, Madame; but a duel with a wild beast is not amenable to his Majesty."

"Oh, you will not insult me by supposing that I should credit the absurd fable which has been reported — with what object I cannot tell — respecting M. de Guiche's having been wounded by a wild boar. No, no, Monsieur, the real truth is known; and at this moment, in addition to the inconvenience of his wound, M. de Guiche runs the risk of losing his liberty."

"Alas, Madame," said Manicamp, "I am well aware of that; but what is to be done?"

"You have seen his Majesty?"

"Yes, Madame."

"What did you say to him?"

"I told him how M. de Guiche had been to the chase, and how a wild boar had rushed forth out of the Rochin wood; how M. de Guiche fired at it, and how, in fact, the furious brute dashed at the hunter, killed his horse, and grievously wounded himself."

"And the king believed that?"

"Perfectly."

"Oh, you surprise me, M. de Manicamp; you surprise me very much!" and Madame walked up and down the room, casting a searching look from time to time at Manicamp, who remained motionless and impassive in the same position that he had taken on his entrance. At last she stopped. "And yet," she said, "every one here seems agreed in giving another cause for this wound."

"What cause, Madame?" said Manicamp; "may I be permitted, without indiscretion, to ask your Highness that question?"

"You ask that!—you, M. de Guiche's intimate friend, his confidant, indeed!"

"Oh, Madame! the intimate friend—yes; the confidant—no. De Guiche is one of those men who can keep his own secrets,—who has some of his own, certainly, but who never breathes a syllable about them. De Guiche is discretion itself, Madame."

"Very well, then; those secrets which M. de Guiche keeps so scrupulously, I shall have the pleasure of acquainting you with," said the princess, spitefully. "For the king may possibly question you a second time; and if

on the second occasion you were to repeat the same story that you told him at first, he possibly might not be very well satisfied with it."

"But, Madame, I think your Highness is mistaken with regard to the king. His Majesty has been perfectly satisfied with me, I assure you."

"In that case, permit me to tell you, M. de Manicamp, it only shows that his Majesty is very easily satisfied."

"I think that your Highness is wrong in arriving at such an opinion; his Majesty is well known not to be contented except with very good reasons."

"And do you suppose that he will thank you for your officious falsehood, when he learns to-morrow that M. de Guiche had, on behalf of his friend M. de Bragelonne, a quarrel which ended in an hostile meeting?"

"A quarrel on M. de Bragelonne's account!" said Manicamp, with the most innocent expression in the world; "what does your royal Highness do me the honor to tell me?"

"What is there astonishing in that? M. de Guiche is sensitive, irritable, and easily loses his temper."

"On the contrary, Madame, I consider M. de Guiche to be very patient, and never sensitive or irritable except upon very good grounds."

"But is not friendship a just ground?" said the princess.

"Oh, certainly, Madame; and particularly for a heart like his!"

"Very good; you will not deny, I suppose, that M. de Bragelonne is M. de Guiche's friend?"

"A very great friend."

"Well, then, M. de Guiche has taken M. de Bragelonne's part; and as M. de Bragelonne was absent and could not fight, he fought for him."

Manicamp began to smile, and moved his head and shoulders very slightly, as much as to say, "Oh, if you will positively have it so —"

"But speak, at all events," said the princess, out of patience; "speak!"

"I?"

"Of course; it is quite clear that you are not of my opinion, and that you have something to say."

"I have only one thing to say, Madame."

"Say it!"

"That I do not understand a single word of what you have just done me the honor of telling me."

"What! you do not understand a single word about M. de Guiche's quarrel with M. de Wardes!" exclaimed the princess, almost out of temper.

Manicamp remained silent.

"A quarrel," Madame continued, "which arose out of a conversation more or less scandalous in its tone and purport, and more or less well founded, respecting the virtue of a certain lady."

"Ah! of a certain lady, — that is quite another thing," said Manicamp.

"You begin to understand, do you not?"

"Your Highness will excuse me, but I dare not —"

"You dare not," said Madame, exasperated; "very well, then, wait one moment, and I will dare."

"Madame, Madame!" exclaimed Manicamp, as if in great dismay, "be careful of what you are going to say!"

"It would seem, Monsieur, that if I happened to be a man, you would challenge me, notwithstanding his Majesty's edicts, as M. de Guiche challenged M. de Wardes; and that, too, on account of the virtue of Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Of Mademoiselle de la Vallière!" exclaimed Mani-

camp, starting backwards, as if hers were the very last name he expected to hear pronounced.

"What makes you start in that manner, M. de Manicamp?" said Madame, ironically; "do you mean to say that you would be impertinent enough to suspect that young lady's honor?"

"Madame, in the whole course of this affair there has not been the slightest question of Mademoiselle de la Vallière's honor."

"What! when two men have almost blown each other's brains out on a woman's behalf, do you mean to say that she has had nothing to do with the affair, and that her name has not been called in question at all? I did not think you so good a courtier, M. de Manicamp."

"Pray forgive me, Madame," said the young man; "but we are very far from understanding each other. You do me the honor to speak one kind of language, while I, it seems, am speaking altogether another."

"I beg your pardon, but I do not understand your meaning."

"Forgive me, then; but I fancied I understood your Highness to remark that Messieurs de Guiche and de Wardes had fought on Mademoiselle de la Vallière's account."

"Certainly."

"On account of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, I think you said?" repeated Manicamp.

"I do not say that M. de Guiche personally took an interest in Mademoiselle de la Vallière, but I say that he did so as representing or acting on behalf of another."

"On behalf of another?"

"Come, do not always assume such a bewildered look! Does not every one here know that M. de Bragelonne is affianced to Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and that before he went on the mission to London with which the king

intrusted him, he charged his friend M. de Guiche to watch over that interesting young lady?"

"Ah! there is nothing more for me to say, then. Your Highness is well-informed."

"Of everything; so I beg you to understand that clearly."

Manicamp began to laugh, — which almost exasperated the princess, who was not, as we know, of a very patient and enduring disposition.

"Madame," resumed the discreet Manicamp, bowing to the princess, "let us bury this affair altogether in forgetfulness, for it will never be quite cleared up."

"Oh! so far as that goes there is nothing more to be done, and the information is complete. The king will learn that De Guiche has taken up the cause of this little adventuress, who gives herself all the airs of a grand lady; he will learn that M. de Bragelonne having nominated his friend M. de Guiche his guardian-in-ordinary of the garden of the Hesperides, the latter immediately fastened, as he was required to do, upon M. de Wardes, who ventured to touch the golden apple. Moreover, you cannot pretend to deny, M. de Manicamp, — you who know everything so well, — that the king, on his side, casts a longing eye upon this famous treasure, and that he very likely will bear no slight grudge against M. de Guiche for constituting himself the defender of it. Are you sufficiently well informed now, or do you require anything further? If so, speak, Monsieur!"

"No, Madame, there is nothing more that I wish to know."

"Learn, however, — for you ought to know it, M. de Manicamp, — learn that his Majesty's indignation will be followed by terrible consequences. In princes of a similar temperament to that of his Majesty, the passion which jealousy causes sweeps down like a whirlwind."

"Which you will temper, Madame."

"I!" exclaimed the princess, with a gesture of indescribable irony, — "I! and by what right, may I ask?"

"Because you dislike injustice, Madame."

"And according to your account, then, it would be an injustice to prevent the king from arranging his love-affairs as he pleases."

"You will intercede, however, in M. de Guiche's favor?"

"You are mad, Monsieur," said the princess, in a haughty tone.

"On the contrary, Madame, I am in the most perfect possession of my senses; and, I repeat, you will defend M. de Guiche before the king."

"Why should I?"

"Because the cause of M. de Guiche is your own, Madame," said Manicamp in a low voice, with all the ardor with which his eyes were kindled.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Madame, that with respect to the defence which M. de Guiche undertook in M. de Bragelonne's absence, I am surprised that your Highness has not detected a pretext in La Vallière's name having been brought forward."

"A pretext — but a pretext for what?" repeated the princess, hesitatingly, for Manicamp's steady look had just revealed something of the truth to her.

"I trust, Madame," said the young man, "that I have now said sufficient to induce your Highness not to overwhelm before his Majesty my poor friend De Guiche, against whom all the malevolence of a party bitterly opposed to your own will now be directed."

"You mean, on the contrary, I suppose, that all those who have no great affection for Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and even perhaps a few of those who have some regard for her, will be angry with the count?"

"Oh, Madame! why will you push your obstinacy so far, and refuse to open your ears and listen to the words of a devoted friend? Must I expose myself to the risk of your displeasure? Must I name, contrary to my own wish, the person who was the real cause of this quarrel?"

"The person?" said Madame, blushing.

"Must I," continued Manicamp, "tell you how poor De Guiche became irritated, furious, exasperated beyond all control, at the different rumors which are circulating about this person? Must I, if you persist in this wilful blindness, and if respect should continue to prevent my naming her, — must I, I repeat, recall to your recollection the various scenes which Monsieur had with the Duke of Buckingham, and the insinuations which were let fall respecting the Duke's departure? Must I remind you of the anxious care the count always took in his efforts to please, to watch, to protect that person for whom alone he lives, for whom alone he breathes? Well, I will do so; and when I shall have made you recall all that, you will perhaps understand how it happened that the count, at the end of his patience, and having been for some time past tormented by De Wardes, became, at the first disrespectful expression which the latter pronounced respecting the person in question, inflamed with passion, and panted for vengeance."

The princess concealed her face in her hands. "Monsieur, Monsieur!" she exclaimed; "do you know what you are saying, and to whom you are speaking?"

"Therefore, Madame," pursued Manicamp, as if he had not heard the exclamations of the princess, "nothing will astonish you any longer, — neither the count's ardor in seeking this quarrel, nor his wonderful address in transferring it to grounds foreign to your own personal interests. That latter circumstance was, indeed, a marvellous

instance of tact and self-possession; and if the person in whose behalf the Comte de Guiche so fought and shed his blood does in reality owe some gratitude to the poor wounded sufferer, it is not indeed on account of the blood he has shed, or for the agony he has suffered, but for the steps he has taken to preserve from comment or reflection an honor which is more precious to him than his own."

"Oh!" cried Madame, as if she had been alone, "is it possible that the quarrel was on my account?"

Manicamp felt that he could now breathe for a moment, and gallantly had he won the right to do so. Madame, on her side, remained for some time plunged in a painful reverie. Her agitation could be seen by her panting bosom, by her languishing looks, by the frequency with which she pressed her hand upon her heart. But in her coquetry was not so much a passive quality; it was, on the contrary, a fire which sought for fuel to maintain itself, and which found what it required.

"If it be as you assert," she said, "the count will have obliged two persons at the same time; for M. de Bragelonne also owes a deep debt of gratitude to M. de Guiche, — and with far greater reason, indeed, because everywhere and on every occasion Mademoiselle de la Vallière will be regarded as having been defended by this generous champion."

Manicamp perceived that there still remained some lingering doubt in the princess's heart. "A truly admirable service, indeed," he said, "is the one he has rendered to Mademoiselle de la Vallière! A truly admirable service to M. de Bragelonne! The duel has created a sensation which in some respects casts a dishonorable suspicion upon that young girl, — a sensation which will of necessity embroil her with the viscount. The consequence is, that De Wardes's pistol-bullet has had three results instead of

one, — it destroys at the same time the honor of a woman and the happiness of a man, and perhaps it has wounded to death one of the best gentlemen in France. Oh, Madame! your logic is very cold; it always condemns, — it never absolves."

Manicamp's concluding words scattered to the winds the last doubt which lingered, not in Madame's heart, but in her head. She was no longer a princess with her scruples, nor a woman with her returning suspicions; she was one whose heart had just felt the mortal chill of a wound. "Wounded to death!" she murmured, in a faltering voice, "oh, M. de Manicamp! did you not say wounded to death?"

Manicamp returned no other answer than a deep sigh.

"And so you said that the count is dangerously wounded?" continued the princess.

"Yes, Madame; one of his hands is shattered, and he has a bullet lodged in his breast."

"Gracious heavens!" resumed the princess, with a feverish excitement, "this is horrible, M. de Manicamp! A hand shattered, do you say, and a bullet in his breast? And that coward, that wretch, that assassin, De Wardes, who did it! Heaven is unjust!"

Manicamp seemed overcome by violent emotion. He had, in fact, displayed no little energy in the latter part of his speech. As for Madame, she no longer regarded conventional proprieties; for when with her passion spoke in accents either of anger or of sympathy, nothing could any longer restrain her impulses. Madame approached Manicamp, who had sunk down upon a seat, as if his grief were a sufficiently powerful excuse for committing an infraction of one of the laws of etiquette. "Monsieur," she said, seizing him by the hand, "be frank with me!"

Manicamp raised his head.

"Is M. de Guiche in danger of death?"

"Doubly so, Madame," he replied; "in the first place on account of the hemorrhage which has taken place, an artery having been injured in the hand; and next, in consequence of the wound in his breast, which may — the doctor is afraid of it, at least — have injured some vital part."

"He may die, then?"

"Die? — yes, Madame; and without even having the consolation of knowing that you were aware of his devotion."

"You will tell him."

"I?"

"Yes; are you not his friend?"

"I? Oh, no, Madame! I will only tell M. de Guiche, if indeed the poor fellow is still in a condition to hear me, — I will only tell him what I have seen, — that is, your cruelty towards him."

"Oh, Monsieur, you surely will not be guilty of such barbarity!"

"Indeed, Madame, I shall speak the truth, for Nature is very energetic in a man of his age. The physicians are skilful men, and if by chance the poor count should survive his wound, I should not wish him still to be exposed to dying of a wound of the heart, after having escaped that of the body;" and with these words Manicamp rose, and with an expression of profound respect seemed to be desirous of taking leave.

"At least, Monsieur," said Madame, stopping him with almost a suppliant air, "you will be kind enough to tell me in what state your wounded friend is, and who is the physician who attends him?"

"As regards the state he is in, Madame, he is seriously ill; his physician is M. Valot, his Majesty's private medi-

cal attendant. M. Valot is, moreover, assisted by a professional friend, to whose house M. de Guiche has been carried."

"What! he is not in the château?" said Madame.

"Alas, Madame! the poor fellow was so ill that he could not even be conveyed hither."

"Give me the address, Monsieur," said the princess, hurriedly; "I will send to inquire after him."

"Rue du Feurre; a brick house, with white blinds. The doctor's name is on the door."

"You are returning to your wounded friend, M. de Manicamp?"

"Yes, Madame."

"You will be able, then, to do me a service?"

"I am at your Highness's orders."

"Do what you intended to do, — return to M. de Guiche, send away all those whom you may find there, and have the kindness yourself to go away too."

"Madame — "

"Let us waste no time in useless explanations. That is what I require; see nothing in it beyond what there really is, and ask nothing further than what I tell you. I am going to send one of my ladies, perhaps two, because it is now getting late. I do not wish them to see you, or, to be more frank, I do not wish you to see them. These are scruples which you can understand, — you particularly, M. de Manicamp, who seem to be capable of divining everything."

"Oh, Madame, perfectly! I can even do better still. I will walk in advance of your messengers; it will at the same time be a means of showing them the way more accurately, and of protecting them if it should happen that they needed protection, although there is no probability of it!"

"And in this way, then, they would be sure of entering without any difficulty, would they not?"

"Certainly, Madame; for as I should be the first to pass, I should remove any difficulties which might chance to be in the way."

"Very well; go, go, M. de Manicamp, and wait at the bottom of the staircase."

"I go at once, Madame."

"Stay!" Manicamp paused. "When you hear the footsteps of two women descending the stairs, go out, and without once turning round, take the road which leads to where the poor count is lying."

"But if, by any mischance, two other persons were to descend, and I were to be mistaken?"

"You will hear one of the two clap her hands together very softly three times. So, go!"

"Yes, Madame;" and Manicamp turned, bowed once more, and left the room, his heart overflowing with joy. In fact, he knew very well that the presence of Madame herself would be the best balm to apply to his friend's wounds. A quarter of an hour had hardly elapsed when he heard the sound of a door opened softly, and closed with the same precaution. He then heard light footfalls gliding down the staircase, and then three strokes with the hands, — that is to say, the signal agreed upon. He immediately went out, and faithful to his promise bent his way, without once turning his head, through the streets of Fontainebleau towards the doctor's dwelling.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MALICORNE THE KEEPER OF THE RECORDS OF THE KINGDOM OF FRANCE.

Two women, whose figures were completely concealed by their mantles, and whose black velvet masks effectually hid the upper portion of their faces, timidly followed Manicamp's steps. On the first floor, behind curtains of red damask, the soft light of a lamp placed upon a side-board illumined a room, at the other extremity of which, on a large bedstead supported by spiral columns, around which curtains of the same color as those that deadened the rays of the lamp had been closely drawn, lay De Guiche, his head supported by pillows, his eyes looking as if the mists of death were gathering there; his long black hair, scattered in ringlets over the pillow, by its disorder made more prominent the hollowed and pale temples of the young man. It could easily be perceived that fever was the principal occupant of that chamber. De Guiche was dreaming. His wandering mind was pursuing, through gloom and mystery, one of those wild creations which delirium engenders. Two or three drops of blood, still liquid, stained the floor.

Manicamp hurriedly ran up the stairs, but paused at the threshold, gently opened the door, looked into the room, and seeing that everything was perfectly quiet, advanced on tiptoe to the large leathern arm-chair, a specimen of furniture of the reign of Henry IV., and seeing that the nurse, as a matter of course, had dropped off to

sleep, awoke her, and begged her to pass into the adjoining room. Then, standing by the side of the bed, he remained for a moment deliberating whether it would be better to awaken De Guiche, in order to acquaint him with the good news. But as he began to hear behind the door the rustling of the silken dresses and the hurried breathing of those who had accompanied him, and as he already saw that the curtain which hung before the doorway seemed about to be drawn aside, he passed round the bed and followed the nurse into the next room. As soon as he had disappeared, the curtain was raised, and the two ladies entered the room he had just left.

The one who entered first made a gesture to her companion which caused her to take her position on a chair close to the door. Then she resolutely advanced towards the bed, drew back the curtains along the iron rod, and threw them in thick folds behind the head of the bed. She gazed upon the count's pallid face, remarked his right hand enveloped in linen whose dazzling whiteness was made more prominent by the counterpane covered with dark leaves which was thrown across a portion of this bed of pain. She shuddered as she saw a spot of blood becoming larger and larger upon the linen bandages. The young man's white chest was quite uncovered, as if the cool night air might assist his respiration. A small bandage fastened the dressings of the wound, around which a bluish circle of extravasated blood was gradually increasing in size. A deep sigh broke from the lips of the young woman. She leaned against one of the columns of the bed, and gazed, through the holes in her mask, upon the harrowing spectacle before her. A hoarse harsh sigh passed like a death-rattle through the count's clinched teeth. The masked lady seized his left hand, which felt as hot as burning coals. But at the very moment she

placed her icy hand upon it, the action of the cold was such that De Guiche opened his eyes, and with a look of reviving intelligence seemed as if struggling back again into existence. The first thing upon which he fixed his gaze was this phantom standing erect by his bedside. At that sight his eyes became dilated, but without any appearance of consciousness in them. The lady thereupon made a sign to her companion, who had remained near the door; and in all probability the latter had already received her lesson, for in a clear tone of voice, and without any hesitation whatever, she pronounced these words: "Monsieur the Count, her royal Highness Madame is desirous of knowing how you are bearing up under the pain of your wound, and to express to you, by my lips, her great regret at seeing you suffer."

As she pronounced the word "Madame," De Guiche started; he had not as yet noticed the person to whom the voice belonged, and he naturally turned towards the direction whence it proceeded. But as he felt the cold hand still resting on his own, he again turned to look at the motionless figure beside him. "Was it you who spoke to me, Madame?" he asked, in a weak voice, "or is there another person besides you in the room?"

"Yes," replied the figure, in an almost unintelligible voice, as she bent down her head.

"Well!" said the wounded man, with a great effort, "I thank you. Tell Madame that I no longer regret dying, since she has remembered me."

At this word "dying," pronounced by this seemingly dying man, the masked lady could not restrain her tears, which flowed under her mask, and appeared upon her cheeks just where the mask left her face bare. If De Guiche had been in fuller possession of his senses, he would have seen her tears roll like glistening pearls, and

fall upon his bed. The lady, forgetting that she wore a mask, raised her hand as though to wipe her eyes, and meeting the rough cold velvet, she tore away her mask in anger and threw it on the floor. At the unexpected apparition before him, which seemed to issue from a cloud, De Guiche uttered a cry and stretched out his arms towards her; but every word perished on his lips, and his strength seemed utterly abandoning him. His right hand, which had followed his first impulse without calculating the amount of strength he had left, fell back again upon the bed, and immediately afterwards the white linen was reddened with a larger spot than before. In the mean time the young man's eyes became dim, and closed as if he were already struggling with the unconquerable angel of death; and then, after a few involuntary movements, his head fell back motionless on his pillow, — from pale he had become livid. The lady was frightened; but now, contrary to its usual character, fright was fascinating. She leaned over the young man, gazed earnestly at his pale and cold face, which she was almost touching, then imprinted a rapid kiss upon the left hand of De Guiche, who, trembling as if an electric shock had passed through him, awoke a second time, opened his large eyes, incapable of recognition, and again fell into a state of complete insensibility. "Come," she said to her companion, "we must not remain here any longer; I shall be committing some folly or other."

"Madame, Madame, your Highness is forgetting your mask!" said her vigilant companion.

"Pick it up," replied her mistress, as she tottered distracted towards the staircase; and as the street-door had been left only half closed, the two women, light as birds, passed through it, and with hurried steps returned to the palace. One of them ascended towards Madame's apart-

ments, where she disappeared; the other entered the room belonging to the maids of honor, namely, on the *entresol*, and having reached her own room, sat down before a table, and without giving herself time even to breathe, wrote the following letter:—

"This evening Madame has been to see M. de Guiche. Everything is going on well on this side. See that yours is the same, and do not forget to burn this paper."

She then folded the letter in a long thin form, and leaving her room with every possible precaution crossed a corridor which led to the apartments appropriated to the gentlemen attached to Monsieur's service. She stopped before a door, under which, having previously given two short, quick knocks, she thrust the paper and fled. Then, returning to her own room, she removed every trace of her having gone out and also of having written the letter. Amid the investigations she was so diligently pursuing for this purpose, she perceived on the table the mask which belonged to Madame, and which, according to her mistress's directions, she had brought back, but had forgotten to restore to her. "Oh!" she said, "I must not forget to do to-morrow what I have forgotten to do to-day."

And she took hold of the velvet mask by that part of it which covered the cheeks, and feeling that her thumb was wet, she looked at it. It was not only wet, but reddened. The mask had fallen upon one of the spots of blood which we have already said stained the floor; and from the black velvet outside, which had accidentally come into contact with it, the blood had passed through to the inside and stained the white cambric lining. "Oh!" said Montalais, for doubtless our readers have already recognized her by these various manœuvres, "I

shall not give her back her mask; it is far too precious now;" and rising from her seat, she ran to a box made of maple-wood, which enclosed different toilet articles and perfumery. "No, not here," she said; "such a treasure must not be abandoned to the slightest chance of detection."

Then, after a moment's silence, and with a smile which was peculiarly her own, she added: "Beautiful mask, stained with the blood of that brave knight, you shall go and join that collection of wonders, La Vallière's and Raoul's letters, — that loving collection, indeed, which will some day or other form part of the history of France and of royalty. You shall be taken under M. Malicorne's care," said the laughing girl, as she began to undress herself, — "under the protection of that worthy M. Malicorne," she said, blowing out the taper, "who thinks he was born only to become the master of apartments to Monsieur, and whom I will make keeper of the records and historiographer of the house of Bourbon and of the first families in the kingdom. Let him grumble now, that discontented Malicorne!" and she drew the curtains and fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE JOURNEY.

THE next day being agreed upon for the departure, the king, at eleven o'clock precisely, descended the grand staircase with the two queens and Madame, in order to enter his carriage drawn by six horses, which were pawing the ground in impatience at the foot of the steps. The whole court awaited the royal appearance in the Fer-à-Cheval, in their travelling costumes; the large number of saddled horses and carriages of ladies and gentlemen of the court, surrounded by their attendants, servants, and pages, formed a brilliant spectacle. The king entered his carriage with the two queens; Madame entered a carriage with Monsieur. The maids of honor followed the example, and took their seats, two by two, in the carriages provided for them. The king's carriage headed the procession; then came that of Madame; then the others followed according to etiquette and rank. The weather was very warm; a light breeze, which early in the morning all had thought sufficient to cool the air, soon became fiercely heated by the rays of the sun, lying in wait behind the clouds, and filtered through the heated vapor which rose from the ground only as a scorching wind, bearing particles of fine dust against the faces of the impatient travellers. Madame was the first to complain of the heat. Monsieur's only reply was to throw himself back in the carriage, as if he were about to faint, and to inundate himself with salts and perfumes, uttering the

deepest sighs all the while; whereupon Madame said to him, with her most amiable expression, "Really, Monsieur, I fancied that you would have been polite enough, on account of the terrible heat, to have left me my carriage to myself, and to have performed the journey yourself on horseback."

"Ride on horseback!" cried the prince, with an accent of dismay which showed how little idea he had of adopting this strange project; "you cannot be thinking of such a thing, Madame! My skin would peel off if I were to expose myself to such a burning air as this."

Madame began to laugh. "You can take my parasol," she said.

"But the trouble of holding it!" replied Monsieur, with the greatest coolness; "besides, I have no horse."

"How? no horse!" replied the princess, who, if she did not obtain the solitude she desired, at least obtained the amusement of teasing,—"no horse! You are mistaken, Monsieur; for I see your favorite bay out yonder."

"My bay horse!" exclaimed the prince, attempting to lean forward to look out of the door; but the movement he was obliged to make cost him so much trouble that he did not half finish it, and he hastened to resume his position of repose.

"Yes," said Madame; "your horse, led by M. de Malicorne."

"Poor beast!" replied the prince; "how warm he will be!"

And with these words he closed his eyes, like a man on the point of expiring. Madame, on her side, reclined indolently in the other corner of the carriage, and closed her eyes also, not however to sleep, but to think more at her ease. In the mean time the king, seated on the front seat of the carriage, the back seat of which he had yielded up

to the two queens, was a prey to that restless contrariness experienced by anxious lovers, who without being able to quench their ardent thirst are ceaselessly desirous of seeing the loved object, and then go away partially satisfied, without perceiving that they have acquired a more burning thirst than ever.

The king, whose carriage headed the procession, could not from the place he occupied perceive the carriages of the ladies and maids of honor, which came last. Besides, he was obliged to answer the eternal questions of the young queen, who, happy to have with her "*her dear husband*," as she called him, in utter forgetfulness of royal etiquette invested him with all her affection, stifled him with her attentions, afraid that some one might come to take him from her, or that he himself might suddenly take a fancy to leave her society. Anne of Austria, whom nothing at that moment disturbed except the occasional dull throbbings in her bosom, looked pleased and delighted, and although she perfectly conceived the king's impatience, tantalizingly prolonged his sufferings by unexpectedly resuming the conversation at the very moment when the king, absorbed in his own reflections, began to muse over his secret attachment.

Everything — the little attentions of the queen, and the queen-mother's tantalizing interruptions — seemed to combine to make the king's position almost insupportable; for he knew not how to control the restless longings of his heart. At first he complained of the heat, — a complaint which was merely preliminary to other complaints, but with sufficient tact to prevent Maria Theresa from guessing his real object. Understanding therefore the king's remark literally, she began to fan Louis with her ostrich plumes. But the heat passed away, and the king then complained of cramps and stiffness in his legs; and as the

carriages at that moment stopped to change horses, the queen said: "Shall I get out with you? I too feel tired of sitting. We can walk on a little distance; the carriages will overtake us, and we can resume our places again."

The king frowned; it is a hard trial to which a jealous woman subjects her husband whose fidelity she suspects, when, although herself a prey to jealousy, she watches herself so narrowly that she avoids giving any pretext for an angry feeling. The king, therefore, in the present case could not refuse; he accepted the offer, alighted from the carriage, gave his arm to the queen, and walked a short distance with her while the horses were being changed. As he walked along, he cast an envious glance upon the courtiers who were fortunate enough to be performing the journey on horseback.

The queen soon found out that walking pleased the king as little as riding in the carriage. She accordingly expressed a wish to return to her carriage; and the king conducted her to the door, but did not get in with her. He stepped back a few paces, and looked along the file of carriages to discover the one in which he took so strong an interest. At the door of the sixth carriage he saw La Vallière's fair countenance. As the king thus stood motionless, wrapped in thought, without perceiving that everything was ready, and that they were now waiting only for him, he heard a voice close beside him, addressing him in the most respectful manner. It was M. de Malicorne, in a complete costume of an equerry, holding over his left arm the bridles of two horses.

"Did your Majesty ask for a horse?" he said.

"A horse? Have you one of my horses here?" inquired the king, who endeavored to remember the person who addressed him, and whose face was not as yet very familiar to him.

"Sire," replied Malicorne, "at all events, I have a horse which is at your Majesty's service;" and Malicorne pointed to Monsieur's bay horse, which Madame had observed. It was a beautiful creature and most royally caparisoned.

"But this is not one of my horses, Monsieur," said the king.

"Sire, it is a horse out of his royal Highness's stables; but his royal Highness does not ride when the weather is so hot."

The king did not reply, but hastily approached the horse, which stood pawing the ground with his foot. Malicorne hastened to hold the stirrup for him, but his Majesty was already in the saddle. Restored to good humor by this lucky accident, the king hastened smilingly towards the queen's carriage, where he was anxiously expected; and notwithstanding Maria Theresa's preoccupied air, he said: "I have been fortunate enough to find this horse, and I intend to avail myself of it. I felt stifled in the carriage. Adieu, ladies!"

Then bending graciously over the arched neck of his steed, he disappeared in a second. Anne of Austria leaned forward, in order to look after him as he rode away; he did not go very far, for when he reached the sixth carriage, he reined in his horse suddenly and took off his hat. He saluted La Vallière, who uttered a cry of surprise as she saw him, blushing at the same time with pleasure. Montalais, who occupied the other seat in the carriage, made the king a most profound bow; and then, with all the tact of a woman, she pretended to be exceedingly interested in the landscape, and withdrew herself into the left-hand corner.

The conversation between the king and La Vallière began, as all lovers' conversations generally do, by eloquent

looks and by a few words devoid of meaning. The king explained how warm he had felt in his carriage, — so much so, indeed, that he had esteemed a horse as a benefaction. "And," he added, "my benefactor is an exceedingly intelligent man, for he seemed to guess my thoughts intuitively. I have now only one wish, that of learning the name of the gentleman who so cleverly served his king and extricated him from his painful weariness."

Montalais during this colloquy, the first words of which had awakened her attention, had slightly altered her position, and had contrived so as to meet the king's look as he finished his remark. It followed very naturally that the king looked inquiringly as much at her as at La Vallière; she had every reason to suppose that it was she who was appealed to, and consequently might be permitted to answer. She therefore said, "Sire, the horse which your Majesty is riding belongs to Monsieur, and was being led by one of his royal Highness's gentlemen."

"And what is that gentleman's name, may I ask, Mademoiselle?"

"M. de Malicorne, Sire."

The name produced its usual effect, for the king repeated it smilingly.

"Yes, Sire," replied Aure. "Stay! it is that gentleman who is galloping on my left hand;" and indeed she pointed out our Malicorne, who with a very sanctified expression was galloping on the left side of the carriage, knowing perfectly well that they were talking of him at that very moment, but sitting in his saddle as if he were deaf and dumb.

"Yes," said the king, "that is the gentleman. I remember his face, and will not forget his name;" and the king looked tenderly at La Vallière.

Aure had now nothing further to do. She had let Mali-

corne's name fall; the soil was good; all that was necessary now was to let the name take root, and the event would bear its fruit in due time. She consequently threw herself back in her corner, feeling perfectly justified in making as many agreeable signs of recognition as she liked to M. de Malicorne, since the latter had had the happiness of pleasing the king. As will very readily be believed, Montalais was not mistaken; and Malicorne, with his quick ear and his sly look, seemed to interpret her remark as "All goes on well," the whole being accompanied by a pantomime which he fancied conveyed something resembling a kiss.

"Alas! Mademoiselle," said the king, after a moment's pause, "the liberty and freedom of the country are soon about to cease; your attendance upon Madame will be more strictly enforced, and we shall see each other no more."

"Your Majesty is too much attached to Madame," replied Louise, "not to come to see her frequently; and whenever your Majesty may pass across the apartments —"

"Ah!" said the king, in a tender voice, which was gradually lowered in its tone, "to perceive is not to see, and yet it seems that it would be quite sufficient for you."

Louise did not answer; a sigh filled her heart almost to bursting, but she stifled it.

"You exercise a great control over yourself," said the king to Louise, who smiled upon him with a melancholy expression. "Exert the strength you have in loving fondly," he continued, "and I will bless Heaven for having bestowed it on you."

La Vallière still remained silent, but raised her eyes, brimful of affection, to the king. Louis, as if he had been
ıe by this burning glance, passed his hand across
ıead, and pressing his horse's sides with his knees

made him bound several paces forward. La Vallière, leaning back in her carriage, with her eyes half closed, gazed fixedly upon this handsome cavalier, whose plumes were floating in the breeze; she could not but admire his graceful carriage, his delicate and nervous limbs, which pressed his horse's side, and the regular outline of his features, which his beautiful curling hair set off to great advantage, revealing occasionally his small and well-formed ear. In fact, the poor girl was in love, and she revelled in her love. In a few moments the king was again by her side.

"Do you not perceive," he said, "how terribly your silence affects me? Oh, Mademoiselle, how pitilessly immovable you would become if you were ever to resolve to break off all acquaintance with any one! And then, too, I think you changeable; in fact, — in fact, I dread this deep love which I have for you."

"Oh, Sire, you are mistaken!" said La Vallière; "if ever I love, it will be for my whole life."

"*If* you love, you say," exclaimed the king, sorrowfully; "you do not love now, then." She hid her face in her hands. "You see," said the king, "that I am right in accusing you; you must admit that you are changeable, capricious, a coquette, perhaps."

"Oh, no, Sire, I assure you! No, I say again; no, no!"

"Promise me, then, that for me you will always be the same."

"Oh, always, Sire!"

"That you will never show any of that severity which would break my heart, none of the sudden changes which would be worse than death to me."

"Oh, no, no!"

"Very well, then! but listen. I like promises; I like

to place under the guaranty of an oath, under the protection of Heaven in fact, everything which interests my heart and my affections. Promise me, or rather swear to me, that if in the life we are about to begin, — a life which will be full of sacrifice, mystery, anxiety, disappointment, and misunderstanding, — swear to me that if we should be deceiving or should misunderstand each other, or should be judging each other unjustly, for that indeed would be criminal in love such as ours, — swear to me, Louise — "

La Vallière trembled with agitation to the very depths of her heart; it was the first time she had heard her name pronounced in that manner by her royal lover. As for the king, taking off his glove and reaching his ungloved hand within the carriage, he continued: "Swear that never in all our quarrels will we allow one night even to pass by, if any misunderstanding should arise between us, without a visit, or at least a message, from either, in order to convey consolation and repose to the other."

La Vallière took her lover's burning hand between her own icy palms, and pressed it softly, until a movement of the horse, frightened by the proximity of the wheels, obliged her to abandon her happiness. She had sworn.

"Return, Sire," she said, "return to the queens; I foresee a storm rising yonder, which threatens my peace of mind."

Louis obeyed, saluted Mademoiselle de Montalais, and set off at a gallop to rejoin the queens' carriage. As he passed Monsieur's carriage, he observed that he was fast asleep, although Madame, on her part, was wide awake.

king passed her, she said, "What a beautiful
e! Is it not Monsieur's bay horse?"
the young queen she merely remarked, "Are you
w, Sire?"

CHAPTER XXX.

TRIUMFEMINATE.

On the king's arrival in Paris, he sat at the council which had been summoned, and worked for a certain portion of the day. The queen remained at home with the queen-mother, and burst into tears as soon as she had taken leave of the king. "Ah, Madame!" she said, "the king no longer loves me! What will become of me?"

"A husband always loves his wife when she is like you," replied Anne of Austria.

"A time may come when he will love another woman instead of me."

"What do you call loving?"

"Oh! always thinking of a person, always seeking her society."

"Do you happen to have remarked," said Anne of Austria, "that the king has ever done anything of the sort?"

"No, Madame," said the young queen, hesitatingly.

"What is there to complain of, then, Marie?"

"And yet, my mother, admit that the king leaves me."

"The king, my daughter, belongs to his people."

"And that is the very reason why he no longer belongs to me; and that is the reason, too, why I shall find myself, as so many queens have been before me, forsaken and forgotten, while love, glory, and honors will be reserved for others. Oh, my mother, the king is so handsome! How often will others tell him that they love him, and how much, indeed, they must do so!"

"It is very seldom that women love the man in loving the king. But should that happen, — which I doubt, — you should rather wish, Marie, that such women should really love your husband. In the first place, the devoted love of a mistress is an element in the rapid dissolution of a lover's affection; and in the second place, by dint of loving, the mistress loses all influence over her lover, whose power or wealth she does not covet, caring only for his affection. Wish, therefore, that the king should love but lightly, and that his mistress should love with all her heart."

"Oh, my mother, what power may not a deep affection exercise over him!"

"And yet you say you are abandoned?"

"Quite true, quite true; I speak absurdly. There is a feeling of anguish, however, which I can never control."

"And that is —"

"The king may make a happy choice, — may find a home, not far from that we can offer him, — a home with children around him, the children of another woman than myself. Oh, I should die if I were ever to see the king's children!"

"Marie, Marie!" replied the queen-mother, with a smile, as she took the young queen's hand in her own, "remember what I am going to say, and let it always be a consolation to you, — the king cannot have a Dauphin without you, and you may have one without him."

With this remark, which she accompanied with an expressive burst of laughter, the queen-mother left her daughter-in-law in order to go to meet Madame, whose arrival in the grand boudoir had just been announced by one of the pages.

Madame had scarcely taken time to change her dress.

Her face revealed her agitation, which betrayed a plan the execution of which occupied her mind, while the probable results disturbed her. "I came to ascertain," she said, "whether your Majesties are suffering any fatigue from our journey."

"None at all," said the queen-mother.

"Very slight," replied Maria Theresa.

"I have suffered from annoyance more than from anything else," said Madame.

"What annoyance?" inquired Anne of Austria.

"The fatigue which the king undergoes in riding on horseback."

"That does the king good."

"And it was I who advised him to do it," said Maria Theresa, turning pale.

Madame said not a word in reply; but one of those smiles which were peculiarly her own flitted for a moment across her lips, without passing over the rest of her face; then, immediately changing the subject of conversation, she continued: "We shall find Paris precisely like the Paris we left, — the same intrigues, plots, and flirtations going on."

"Intrigues! To what intrigues do you allude?" inquired the queen-mother.

"People are talking a good deal about M. Fouquet and Madame de Plessis-Bellière."

"Who makes up the number to about ten thousand," replied the queen-mother. "But what are the plots, if you please?"

"We have, it seems, certain misunderstandings with Holland."

"What about?"

"Monsieur has been telling me the story of the medals."

"Oh!" exclaimed the young queen, "you mean those

medals which were struck in Holland, on which a cloud is seen passing across the sun, which is the king's device. You are wrong in calling that a plot, — it is an insult."

"But so contemptible that the king can well despise it," replied the queen-mother. "Well, what are the flirtations to which you alluded? Do you mean that of Madame d'Olonne?"

"No, no; nearer ourselves than that."

"*Casa de usted*," murmured the queen-mother, and without moving her lips, in Maria Theresa's ear.

She was not overheard by Madame, who thus continued: "You know the terrible news?"

"Oh, yes; M. de Guiche's wound."

"And do you attribute it, as every one else does, to an accident which happened to him while hunting?"

"Why, yes," said both the queens together, their interest awakened.

Madame drew closer to them, as she said, in a low tone, "It was a duel."

"Ah!" said Anne of Austria, in a severe tone; for in her ears the word "duel," which had been forbidden in France since she had reigned over it, had a wicked sound.

"A most deplorable duel, which has nearly cost Monsieur two of his best friends, and the king two of his best servants."

"What was the cause of the duel?" inquired the young queen, animated by a secret instinct.

"Flirtations," repeated Madame, triumphantly. "These gentlemen were conversing about the virtue of a lady. One of them thought that Pallas was a very second-rate person compared to her; the other pretended that the lady in question was an imitation of Venus alluring Mars; and upon my word the two gentlemen fought like Hector and Achilles."

"Venus alluring Mars?" said the young queen, in a low tone, without venturing to examine into the allegory very deeply.

"Who is the lady?" inquired Anne of Austria, abruptly. "You said, I believe, that she was one of the ladies of honor?"

"Did I say so?" replied Madame.

"Yes; I even thought that I heard you give her name."

"Are you not aware that such a woman is of ill omen to a royal house?"

"Is it Mademoiselle de la Vallière?" said the queen-mother.

"Yes, indeed, it is that ugly little creature."

"I thought that she was affianced to a gentleman who certainly is not — at least, I suppose so — either M. de Guiche or M. de Wardes."

"Very possibly, Madame."

The young queen took up a piece of tapestry, and began to unravel it with an affectation of tranquillity which her trembling fingers contradicted.

"What were you saying about Venus and Mars?" pursued the queen-mother. "Is there a Mars also?"

"She boasts of that being the case."

"Did you say she boasts of it?"

"That was the cause of the duel."

"And M. de Guiche upheld the cause of Mars?"

"Yes, certainly, like the devoted servant he is."

"The devoted servant of whom?" exclaimed the young queen, forgetting all her reserve in allowing her jealousy to escape her; "the servant of whom?"

"Mars not being able to be defended except at the expense of this Venus," replied Madame, "M. de Guiche maintained the perfect innocence of Mars, and no doubt affirmed that it was a mere boast of Venus."

"And M. de Wardes," said Anne of Austria, quietly, "spread the report that Venus was right, I suppose?"

"Ah! De Wardes," thought Madame, "you shall pay most dearly for the wound you have given that noblest of men!" And she began to attack De Wardes with the greatest bitterness; thus discharging the debt of the wounded man and her own, with the assurance that she was working the future ruin of her enemy. She said so much, in fact, that had Manicamp been there he would have regretted that he had shown such strong regard for his friend, inasmuch as it resulted in the ruin of his unfortunate foe.

"I see in the whole affair but one cause of mischief, and that is La Vallière herself," said the queen-mother.

The young queen resumed her work with a perfect indifference of manner, while Madame listened eagerly.

"Is not that your opinion?" said Anne of Austria to her. "Do you not lay to her the cause of this quarrel and encounter?"

Madame replied by a gesture which was no more a sign of affirmation than of dissent.

"I do not yet quite understand what you said just now about the danger of coquetry," resumed Anne of Austria.

"It is quite true," Madame hastened to say, "that if the girl had not been a coquette, Mars would not have thought at all about her."

The repetition of this word "Mars" brought a passing color to the young queen's cheeks; but she still continued her work.

"I will not permit that in my court gentlemen should be set against one another in this manner," said Anne of Austria, calmly. "Such manners were useful enough, perhaps, in a time when the divided nobility had no other rallying-point than mere gallantry. At that time women,

whose sway was absolute and undivided, were privileged to encourage men's valor by frequent trials of their courage; but now, thank Heaven, there is but one master in France, and to him every thought of the mind and every pulse of the body are due. I will not allow my son to be deprived of any one of his servants;" and she turned towards the young queen, saying, "What is to be done with this La Vallière?"

"La Vallière?" said the queen, apparently surprised; "I do not even know the name;" and she accompanied this answer with one of those frigid smiles which are observed only on royal lips.

Madame was herself a princess great in every respect, — great in intelligence, great by birth and pride. The queen's reply, however, completely astonished her, and she was obliged to pause for a moment in order to recover herself. "She is one of my maids of honor," she replied, with a bow.

"In that case," retorted Maria Theresa, in the same tone, "it is your affair, my sister, and not ours."

"I beg your pardon," resumed Anne of Austria, "it is my affair; and I perfectly well understand," she pursued, addressing a look full of intelligence at Madame, "Madame's motive for saying what she has just said."

"Everything which emanates from you, Madame," said the English princess, "proceeds from the lips of Wisdom."

"If we send this girl back again to her own family," said Maria Theresa, gently, "we must bestow a pension upon her."

"Which I will provide for out of my income," exclaimed Madame, quickly.

"No, no, Madame," interrupted Anne of Austria; "no disturbance, I beg. The king does not like to have any woman spoken of with disrespect. Let everything be

done quietly, if you please. Will you have the kindness, Madame, to send for this girl here? You, my daughter, will have the goodness to retire to your own room."

The old queen's requests were commands; and as Maria Theresa rose to return to her own apartments, Madame rose in order to send a page to summon La Vallière.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE FIRST QUARREL.

La Vallière entered the queen-mother's apartments without in the least suspecting that a serious plot was being concerted against her. She thought it was for something connected with her duties, and never had the queen-mother been unkind to her when such was the case. Besides, not being immediately under the control of Anne of Austria, she could have only an official connection with her, to which her own gentleness of disposition and the rank of the august princess made her yield on every occasion with the best possible grace. She therefore advanced towards the queen-mother with that soft and gentle smile which constituted her principal charm; and as she did not approach sufficiently close, Anne of Austria signed to her to come nearer. Madame then entered the room, and with a perfectly calm air took her seat beside her mother-in-law and continued the work which Maria Theresa had begun. When La Vallière, instead of the directions which she expected immediately to receive, perceived these preparations, she looked with curiosity, if not with uneasiness, at the two princesses. Anne seemed deliberating, while Madame maintained an affectation of indifference which would have alarmed a less timid person even than Louise.

"Mademoiselle," said the queen-mother suddenly, without attempting to moderate or disguise her Spanish accent, which she never failed to do except when she was angry, "come closer; we were talking of you, as every one else seems to be doing."

"Of me!" exclaimed La Vallière, turning pale.

"Pretend to be ignorant of it; that is right. Do you know of the duel between M. de Guiche and M. de Wardes?"

"Oh, Madame! I heard a rumor of it yesterday," said La Vallière, clasping her hands.

"And did you not foresee this quarrel?"

"Why should I, Madame?"

"Because two men never fight without a motive, and because you must be aware of the motive which awakened the animosity of the two adversaries."

"I am perfectly ignorant of it, Madame."

"A persevering denial is a very commonplace mode of defence; and you, who have great pretensions to be witty and clever, Mademoiselle, ought to avoid commonplaces. What else have you to say?"

"Oh, Madame, your Majesty terrifies me with your cold severity! Have I been so unfortunate as to incur your displeasure?"

Madame began to laugh, and La Vallière looked at her with an amazed air.

Anne resumed: "My displeasure! — incur my displeasure! You do not reflect, Mademoiselle de la Vallière, that it is necessary for me to notice people in order to visit them with my displeasure. I notice you only because people are talking about you a little too much, and I do not like to have them talk about the young ladies of my court."

"Your Majesty does me great honor," replied La Vallière, alarmed; "but I do not understand why people should occupy themselves with me."

"Then I will tell you. M. de Guiche has been obliged to undertake your defence."

"My defence?"

"Yes. He is a gallant knight, and beautiful adventuresses like to see brave knights couch their lances in their honor. But for my part I hate fields of battle; and more than all, do I hate adventures, and — Make your own application!"

La Vallière sank at the queen's feet, who turned her back upon her. She stretched out her hands towards Madame, who laughed in her face. A feeling of pride made her rise to her feet.

"I have begged your Majesty to tell me what is the crime I am accused of, — I can claim this at your Majesty's hands; and I observe that I am condemned before I am even permitted to justify myself."

"Eh! indeed," cried Anne of Austria, "listen to her fine phrases, Madame, and to her fine sentiments; she is an inexhaustible well of tenderness and of heroic expressions. One can easily see, young lady, that we have cultivated our mind in the society of crowned heads."

La Vallière felt struck to the heart; she became, not paler, but as white as a lily, and all her strength forsook her.

"I wished to inform you," interrupted the queen, disdainfully, "that if you continue to nourish such feelings, you will humiliate the rest of us to such a degree that we shall be ashamed to appear before you. Become simple in your manners, Mademoiselle! By the by, I am informed that you are affianced; is it the case?"

La Vallière pressed her hand over her heart, which was wrung with a fresh pang.

"Answer when you are spoken to!"

"Yes, Madame."

"To a gentleman?"

"Yes, Madame."

"His name?"

"M. le Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"Are you aware that it is an exceedingly fortunate circumstance for you, Mademoiselle, that such is the case? And without fortune or position, as you are, or without any very great personal advantages, you ought to bless Heaven for having procured you such a future as seems to be in store for you."

La Vallière did not reply.

"Where is this Vicomte de Bragelonne?" pursued the queen.

"In England," said Madame, "where the report of this young lady's success will not fail to reach him."

"Oh, Heaven!" murmured La Vallière, in despair.

"Very well, Mademoiselle," said Anne of Austria, "we will get this young gentleman to return, and send you away somewhere with him. If you are of a different opinion, — for girls have strange views and fancies at times, — trust to me, I will put you in the proper path again. I have done as much for girls who are not so good as you are, perhaps."

La Vallière ceased to hear the queen, who pitilessly added: "I will send you somewhere by yourself, where you may reflect seriously. Reflection calms the ardor of the blood, and swallows up all the illusions of youth. I suppose you have understood me?"

"Madame, Madame!"

"Not a word!"

"Madame, I am innocent of everything your Majesty can suppose. Oh, Madame! you are a witness of my despair. I love, I respect, your Majesty so much!"

"It would be far better not to respect me at all," said the queen, with chilling irony. "It would be far better if you were not innocent. Do you presume to suppose that I should be satisfied simply to leave you unpunished if you had committed the fault?"

"Oh, Madame, you are killing me!"

"No acting, if you please, or I will undertake the *dénouement* of the comedy. Leave the room; return to your own apartment, and I trust my lesson may be of service to you."

"Madame!" said La Vallière to the Duchesse d'Orléans, whose hands she seized in her own, "do you, who are so good, intercede for me!"

"I!" replied the latter, with an insulting joy, "I — good! Ah, Mademoiselle, I shall do nothing of the kind!" and with a rude, hasty gesture, she repulsed the young girl's hand.

La Vallière, instead of giving way, as from her extreme pallor and from her tears the two princesses might possibly have expected, suddenly resumed her calm and dignified air; she bowed profoundly, and left the room.

"Well!" said Anne of Austria to Madame, "do you think that she will begin again?"

"I always suspect those gentle and patient characters," replied Madame. "Nothing is more full of courage than a patient heart; nothing is more self-reliant than a gentle spirit."

"I assure you that she will think twice before she looks at the god Mars again."

"Unless she secures the protection of his buckler," retorted Madame.

A proud, defiant look of the queen-mother was the reply to this objection, which was by no means deficient in shrewdness; and both of them, almost sure of their victory, went to look for Maria Theresa, who was awaiting them and trying to disguise her impatience.

It was then about half-past six in the evening, and the king had just partaken of some refreshment. He lost no time; but no sooner was the repast finished, and business

matters settled, than he took De Saint-Aignan by the arm, and desired him to lead him to La Vallière's apartments. The courtier uttered a loud exclamation.

"Well, what is that for?" replied the king. "It is a habit you will have to adopt; and in order to adopt a habit, you have to make a beginning."

"But, Sire, the young ladies' apartments here are as open as daylight; every one can see those who enter or leave them. If, however, some pretext or other were made use of, — if your Majesty, for instance, would wait until Madame were in her own apartments — "

"No pretexts, no delays. I have had enough of these disappointments and these mysteries; I cannot perceive in what respect the King of France dishonors himself in conversing with a clever girl. Evil be to him who evil thinks!"

"Will your Majesty forgive an excess of zeal on my part?"

"Speak freely."

"And the queen?"

"True, true; I always wish the greatest respect to be shown to her Majesty. Well, then, this evening only will I pay Mademoiselle de la Vallière a visit, and after to-day I will make use of all the pretexts you like. To-morrow we seek them; to-night I have not the time."

De Saint-Aignan did not reply; he descended the steps, preceding the king, and crossed the different courtyards with a feeling of shame, which the distinguished honor of supporting the king did not remove. For De Saint-Aignan wished to stand well with Madame as well as with the two queens, and he did not, on the other hand, wish to displease Mademoiselle de la Vallière; and in order to carry out so many promising affairs, it was difficult to avoid jostling against some obstacle or other.

Besides, the windows of the young queen's rooms, those of the queen-mother's, and of Madame's looked out upon the courtyard of the maids of honor. To be seen conducting the king, therefore, would be effectually to quarrel with three great princesses — with three women whose authority was unbounded — for the slight inducement of gaining ephemeral credit with a mistress. The unhappy De Saint-Aignan, who had displayed so much courage in taking La Vallière's part in the park of Fontainebleau, did not feel himself so brave in the broad daylight, and found a thousand defects in the poor girl which he was most eager to communicate to the king. But his trial was soon over, — the courtyards were crossed; not a curtain was drawn aside, nor a window opened. The king walked quickly because of his impatience, and also because of the long legs of De Saint-Aignan, who preceded him. At the door De Saint-Aignan wished to retire, but the king desired him to remain; this was a delicate consideration on the king's part, which the courtier could very well have dispensed with. He had to follow Louis into La Vallière's apartment. As soon as the king arrived, the young girl dried her tears, but did it so hurriedly that the king perceived it. He questioned her most anxiously and tenderly, and pressed her to tell him the cause of her emotion.

"I have nothing the matter with me, Sire," she said.

"And yet you were weeping."

"Oh, no, indeed, Sire."

"Look, De Saint-Aignan! am I mistaken?"

De Saint-Aignan ought to have answered, but he was greatly embarrassed.

"At all events, your eyes are red, Mademoiselle," said the king.

"The dust of the road merely, Sire."

"No, no; you no longer possess that air of supreme contentment which renders you so beautiful and so attractive. You do not look at me. Why avoid my gaze?" he said, as she turned aside her head. "In Heaven's name, what is the matter?" he inquired, beginning to lose all command over himself.

"Nothing at all, Sire, I repeat; and I am perfectly ready to assure your Majesty that my mind is as free from anxiety as you could possibly wish."

"Your mind at ease, when I see that you are embarrassed in your every look and gesture! Has any one wounded or annoyed you?"

"No, no, Sire."

"I insist upon knowing if such really be the case," said the young prince, his eyes flashing.

"No one, Sire; no one has offended me."

"In that case do resume your gentle air of gayety, or that sweet melancholy look which I so loved in you this morning; for pity's sake, do so!"

"Yes, Sire, yes."

The king struck the floor impatiently with his foot, saying, "Such a change is positively inexplicable;" and he looked at De Saint-Aignan, who had also remarked La Vallière's heavy languor of manner as well as the king's impatience.

It was utterly useless for the king to entreat, and as useless for him to try his utmost to overcome that deadly sorrow; the poor girl was completely prostrated, — the aspect of death itself could not have awakened her from her torpor. The king saw, in her repeated negative replies, a mystery full of unkindness; he began to look all around him with a suspicious air.

There happened to be in La Vallière's room a miniature portrait of Athos. The king remarked this portrait, which

bore a considerable resemblance to Bragelonne, for it had been taken when the count was quite a young man. He regarded this picture with a threatening air. La Vallière, in her depressed state of mind, and very far indeed from thinking of this portrait, could not interpret the king's preoccupation. And yet the king's mind was occupied with a terrible remembrance, which had more than once taken possession of him, but which he had always driven away. He recalled the intimacy which had existed between the two young persons from their birth, the engagement which had followed, and the fact that Athos had himself come to solicit La Vallière's hand for Raoul. He imagined that on her return to Paris La Vallière had found certain news from London awaiting her, and that this news had counterbalanced the influence which he had been enabled to exert over her. He immediately felt himself stung, as it were, by feelings of the wildest jealousy; and he again questioned her, with increased bitterness.

La Vallière could not reply, unless she were to acknowledge everything, which would be to accuse the queen, and Madame also; and the consequence would be that she would have to enter upon an open warfare with these two great and powerful princesses. She thought within herself that as she made no attempt to conceal from the king what was passing in her own mind, the king ought to be able to read her heart, in spite of her silence; and that if he really loved her, he would have understood, and guessed everything. What was sympathy, then, if it were not that divine flame which should enlighten the heart, and save true lovers the necessity of words? She maintained her silence, therefore, satisfying herself with sighing, weeping, and concealing her face in her hands.

These sighs and tears, which had at first distressed and

then alarmed Louis XIV., now irritated him. He could not bear any opposition, — not the opposition which tears and sighs exhibited, any more than opposition of any other kind. His remarks, therefore, became bitter, urgent, and aggressive. This was a fresh cause of distress for the poor girl. From that very circumstance which she regarded as an injustice on her lover's part, she drew sufficient courage to bear, not only her other troubles, but even this one also.

The king next began to accuse her in direct terms. La Vallière did not even attempt to defend herself; she endured all his accusations without according any other reply than that of shaking her head, without making any other remark than that which escapes every heart in deep distress, by a prayerful appeal to Heaven for help. But this ejaculation, instead of calming the king's displeasure, rather increased it; it was an appeal to a higher power than his own, to a being who could protect La Vallière against himself. He, moreover, saw himself seconded by De Saint-Aignan; for De Saint-Aignan, as we have observed, having seen the storm increasing, and not knowing the extent of the regard of which Louis XIV. was capable, felt by anticipation all the collected wrath of the three princesses, and the near approach of poor La Vallière's downfall, and he was not true knight enough to resist the fear that he himself might possibly be dragged down in the impending ruin. De Saint-Aignan did not reply to the king's questions except by short remarks, pronounced half aloud; and by abrupt gestures, whose object was to make things worse, and bring about a misunderstanding, the result of which would be to free him from the annoyance of having to cross the courtyards in broad open day, in order to follow his illustrious companion to La Vallière's apartments.

In the mean time the king's anger momentarily increased; he made two or three steps towards the door, as if to leave the room, but then returned; the young girl had not raised her head, although the sound of his footsteps might have warned her that her lover was leaving her. He drew himself up for a moment before her, with his arms crossed. "For the last time, Mademoiselle," he said, "will you speak? Will you assign a reason for this change, for this fickleness, for this caprice?"

"What can I say?" murmured La Vallière. "Do you not see, Sire, that I am completely overwhelmed at this moment, — that I have no power of will or thought or speech?"

"Is it so difficult, then, to speak the truth? You would have told me the truth in fewer words than those you have just uttered."

"But the truth about what, Sire?"

"About everything."

La Vallière was just on the point of revealing the whole truth to the king; her arms made a sudden movement as if they were about to open, but her lips remained silent, and her arms resumed their former position. The poor girl had not yet endured sufficient unhappiness to risk the necessary revelation. "I know nothing," she stammered out.

"Oh!" exclaimed the king, "this is more than mere coquetry or caprice; it is treason." And this time nothing could restrain him; the impulses of his heart were not sufficient to induce him to turn back, and he darted out of the room with a gesture of despair. De Saint-Aignan followed him, wishing for nothing better than to leave the place.

Louis XIV. did not pause until he reached the staircase, and grasping the balustrade said, "You see how shamefully I have been duped."

"How, Sire?" inquired the favorite.

"De Guiche fought on the Vicomte de Bragelonne's account, and this Bragelonne — oh, she still loves him! I vow to you, De Saint-Aignan, that if three days hence there should remain but an atom of affection for her in my heart, I should die from very shame;" and the king resumed his way to his own apartments.

"I assured your Majesty how it would be," murmured De Saint-Aignan, continuing to follow the king, and timidly glancing up at all the windows. Unfortunately their return was not unobserved, as their arrival had been.

A curtain was hurriedly drawn aside; Madame was behind it. She had seen the king leave the apartments of the maids of honor; and as soon as his Majesty had passed, she rose, left her own apartments hurriedly, and ran up the staircase, two steps at a time, which led to the room the king had just left.

CHAPTER XXXII.

DESPAIR.

After the departure of the king, La Vallière raised herself from the ground, and extended her arms, as if to follow and detain him; but when he had violently closed the door, and the sound of his retreating footsteps was lost in the distance, she had hardly sufficient strength left to totter towards and fall at the foot of her crucifix. There she remained, broken-hearted, crushed, and overwhelmed by despair, forgetful of and indifferent to everything but her grief itself, — a grief, moreover, which she could not comprehend except by instinct and sensation. In the midst of the wild tumult of her thoughts, La Vallière heard her door open again; she started, and turned round, thinking that it was the king who had returned. She was mistaken; it was Madame. What did she now care for Madame! Again she sank down, her head resting upon her devotional chair. It was Madame, excited, irritated, and threatening. But what was that to her?

"Mademoiselle," said the princess, standing before La Vallière, "this is very fine, I admit, — to kneel, and pray, and make a pretence of being religious; but however submissive you may be before the King of heaven, it is desirable that you should pay some little attention to the will of the princes of the earth."

La Vallière raised her head painfully in token of respect.

"Not long since," continued Madame, "a certain recommendation was addressed to you, I believe."

La Vallière's fixed and wild gaze showed her unconsciousness and her forgetfulness.

"The queen recommended you," continued Madame, "to conduct yourself in such a manner that no one could be justified in spreading any reports about you."

La Vallière's look became an inquiring one.

"Well," continued Madame, "there has just gone out of your rooms some one whose presence here is an accusation against you."

La Vallière remained silent.

"I will not," continued Madame, "allow my household, which is that of the first princess of the blood, to set an evil example to the court; you would be the cause of such an example. I beg you to understand, therefore, Mademoiselle, in the absence of any witness, — for I do not wish to humiliate you, — that you are from this moment at perfect liberty to leave, and that you may return to your mother at Blois."

La Vallière could not sink lower, nor could she suffer more than she had already suffered. Her countenance did not even change, but she remained with her hands crossed over her knees like the figure of the Magdalen.

"Did you hear me?" said Madame.

A shiver, which passed through her whole frame, was La Vallière's only reply; and as the victim gave no other sign of life, Madame left the room. And then, the very action of her heart suspended, and her blood almost congealed as it were in her veins, La Vallière by degrees felt that the pulsations in her wrists, her neck, and temples became more and more rapid. These pulsations, as they gradually increased, soon changed into a species of brain fever, and in her temporary delirium she saw the figures of her friends contending with her enemies, floating before her vision. She heard, too, mingled together in

her deafened ears, words of menace and words of fond affection; she no longer had any consciousness of self-identity; she seemed raised out of her former existence as though upon the wings of a mighty tempest, and in the dim horizon of the path along which her delirium hurried her, she saw the stone which covered her tomb upraised, and the dark and appalling interior of eternal night revealed to her. But the horror of the dream which had possessed her senses soon faded away, and she was again restored to her habitual resignation. A ray of hope penetrated her heart, as a ray of sunlight streams into the dungeon of some unhappy prisoner. Her mind reverted to the journey from Fontainebleau; she saw the king at the door of her carriage, telling her that he loved her, asking for her love in return, requiring her to swear, and himself swearing too, that never should an evening pass by, if ever a misunderstanding were to arise between them, without a visit, a letter, a sign of some kind, being sent, to replace the troubled anxiety of the evening by the calm repose of the night. It was the king who had suggested that, who had imposed a promise upon her, who had himself sworn it also. It was impossible, therefore, she reasoned, that the king should fail to keep the promise which he had himself exacted, unless, indeed, the king were a despot who enforced love as he enforced obedience; unless, too, the king were so indifferent that the first obstacle in his way were sufficient to arrest his further progress. The king, that kind protector, who by a word, by a single word, could relieve her distress of mind, — the king even joined her persecutors. Oh, his anger could not possibly last! Now that he was alone, he would be suffering all that she herself was a prey to. But he was not tied hand and foot as she was: he could act, could move about, could come to her; while she, she — could do nothing but

wait. And the poor girl waited and waited with breathless anxiety, for she could not believe it possible that the king would not come.

It was now nearly half-past ten. He would either come to her, or write to her, or send some kind word by M. de Saint-Aignan. If he were to come, oh! how she would fly to meet him; how she would thrust aside that excess of delicacy which she now discovered was misunderstood; how eagerly she would explain: "It is not I who do not love you; it is the fault of others who will not allow me to love you!" And then it must be confessed that as she reflected upon it, and precisely in proportion as she reflected, Louis appeared to her to be less blameworthy. In fact, he was ignorant of everything. What must he have thought of the obstinacy with which she had remained silent? Impatient and irritable as the king was known to be, it was extraordinary that he had been able to preserve his temper so long. Oh, she certainly would not have acted in such a manner; she would have understood everything, have guessed everything! Yes; but she was a poor girl, and not a great king. Oh, if he did but come, if he would but come, how eagerly she would forgive him for all he had just made her suffer! how much more tenderly she would love him because she had so suffered! And so she sat, with her head bent forward in eager expectation towards the door, her lips slightly parted, awaiting — and Heaven forgive her for the thought! — the kiss which the king's lips had in the morning so sweetly indicated when he pronounced the word *amour!* If the king did not come, at least he would write; it was a second chance, — a chance less delightful, less happy than the other, but which would show an affection just as strong, if more timorous in its nature. Oh, how she would devour his letter, how she would hasten to answer it! and when

the messenger who had brought it had left her, how she would kiss, read over and over again, press upon her heart the happy paper which would have brought her ease of mind, tranquillity, and perfect happiness! At all events, the king was not coming; if the king did not write, he could not do otherwise than send De Saint-Aignan, or De Saint-Aignan could not do otherwise than come of his own accord. Even if it were a third person, how openly she would speak to him, — the royal presence would not be there to freeze her words upon her tongue, — and then no suspicious feeling would remain a moment longer in the king's heart.

Everything with La Vallière — heart and look, body and mind — was concentrated in eager expectation. She said to herself that there still remained an hour of hope; that until midnight had struck, the king might come or write or send; that at midnight only would every expectation be useless, every hope disappointed. Whenever there was any noise in the palace, the poor girl fancied she was the occasion of it; whenever she heard any one pass in the courtyard below, she imagined that they were messengers of the king coming to her. Eleven o'clock struck; then a quarter-past eleven; then half-past. The minutes dragged slowly on in this anxiety, and yet they seemed to pass far too quickly. And now it struck a quarter to twelve. Midnight, midnight, — the last, the final hope, — came in its turn. With the last stroke of the clock the last light was extinguished; with the last light, the last hope. And so the king himself had deceived her; he had been the first to prove false to the oath which he had sworn that very day. Twelve hours only between his oath and his perjury; it was not long, certainly, to have preserved the illusion. And so not only did the king not love her, but still more, he despised her, whom every one

overwhelmed, — he despised her to the extent even of abandoning her to the shame of an expulsion which was equivalent to having an ignominious sentence passed upon her; and yet it was he, the king himself, who was the first cause of this ignominy.

A bitter smile, the only symptom of anger which during this long conflict had passed across the victim's angelic face, appeared upon her lips. What, in fact, now remained on earth for her, after the king was lost to her? Nothing. But God remained in heaven. She thought of God. "My God!" she said, "show me thyself what course I ought to take. It is from thee that I receive everything, and on thee I ought still to depend;" and she looked at her crucifix with humble and loving devotion. "There," she said, "is a Master who never forgets and never abandons those who do not abandon and who do not forget him; it is to him alone that we must sacrifice ourselves;" and thereupon, could any one have gazed into the recesses of that chamber, he would have seen the poor despairing girl adopt a final resolution, determine upon one last plan in her mind, and mount indeed that lofty Jacob's ladder which leads souls from earth to heaven. Then, as her knees were no longer able to support her, she gradually sank down upon the *prie-dieu*, and with her head pressed against the wooden cross, her eyes fixed, and her respiration short and quick, she watched for the earliest rays of approaching daylight.

At two o'clock in the morning she was still in the same bewilderment of mind, or rather in the same ecstasy of feeling. Her thoughts had almost ceased to hold any communion with the things of this world. And when she saw the violet tints of early dawn descend upon the roofs of the palace and vaguely reveal the outlines of the ivory crucifix which she embraced, she rose from the

ground with a new-born strength, kissed the feet of the divine martyr, and descended the staircase leading from the room, wrapping herself from head to foot in a mantle as she went along. She reached the wicket at the very moment when the guard of Musketeers opened the gate to admit the first relief-guard belonging to one of the Swiss regiments; and then, gliding behind the soldiers, she reached the street before the officer in command of the patrol had even thought of asking who the young girl was who was making her escape from the palace at so early an hour.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE FLIGHT.

La Vallière followed the patrol as it left the courtyard. The patrol bent its steps towards the right, by the Rue St. Honoré, and mechanically La Vallière went to the left. Her resolution was taken, her determination fixed; she wished to betake herself to the convent of the Carmelites at Chaillot, the superior of which enjoyed a reputation for severity which would make the worldly-minded people of the court tremble. La Vallière had never seen Paris. She had never gone out on foot, and so would have been unable to find her way, even had she been in a calmer frame of mind; and this may explain why she ascended, instead of descended, the Rue St. Honoré. Her only thought was to get away from the Palais-Royal, and this she was doing. She had heard it said that Chaillot looked out upon the Seine, and she accordingly directed her steps towards the Seine. She took the Rue du Coq, and not being able to cross the Louvre bore towards the church of St. Germain-l'Auxerrois, proceeding along the site of the colonnade which was subsequently built there by Perrault.

In a very short time she reached the quays. Her steps were rapid and agitated; she scarcely felt the weakness which now and then reminded her of having sprained her foot when very young, and which obliged her to limp slightly. At any other hour in the day her countenance would have awakened the suspicions of the least clear-

sighted persons, or have attracted the attention of the most indifferent passers-by. But at half-past two in the morning the streets of Paris are almost, if not quite, deserted, and scarcely any one is to be seen but the hard-working artisan on his way to earn his daily bread, or the dangerous idlers of the streets, who are returning to their homes after a night of riot and debauchery; for the former the day was beginning, for the latter it was just closing. La Vallière was afraid of all those faces, in which her ignorance of Parisian types did not permit her to distinguish the type of probity from that of dishonesty. The appearance of misery alarmed her, and all whom she met seemed wretched and miserable. Her toilet, which was the same she had worn during the previous evening, was elegant even in its careless disorder, for it was the one in which she had presented herself to the queen-mother; and, moreover, when she drew aside the mantle which covered her face, in order to enable her to see the way she was going, her pallor and her beautiful eyes spoke an unknown language to the men she met, and without knowing it, the poor fugitive awakened the brutality of some, the compassion of others.

La Vallière still walked on in the same way, breathless and hurried, until she reached the top of the Place de Grève. She stopped from time to time, placed her hand upon her heart, leaned against a wall until she could breathe freely again, and then continued her course more rapidly than before. On reaching the Place de Grève, La Vallière suddenly came upon a group of three drunken men, dishevelled and reeling and staggering along, who were just leaving a boat, which they had made fast to the quay; the boat was freighted with wines, and it was apparent that they had done complete justice to the merchandise. They were singing their convivial exploits in three

different keys, when suddenly, as they reached the end of the railing leading down to the quay, they all at once found themselves obstructing the path of this young girl. La Vallière stopped; while they on their side, at the appearance of the young girl dressed in court costume, also halted, and with one accord, seizing each other by the hand, they surrounded La Vallière, singing, —

"Oh, you who sadly are wandering alone,
Come, come, and laugh with us!"

La Vallière at once understood that the men were addressing her, and wished to prevent her from passing; she made many efforts to escape, but they were useless. Her limbs failed her; she felt that she was on the point of falling, and uttered a cry of terror. But at the same moment the circle which surrounded her was suddenly broken through in a most violent manner. One of her insulters was knocked to the left, another fell rolling over and over to the right close to the water's edge, while the third could hardly keep his feet. An officer of the Musketeers stood face to face with the young girl, with frowning brow, a threat on his lips, and his hand raised to give the threat fulfilment. The drunken fellows, at the sight of the uniform, made their escape with all despatch, — and the greater for the proof of strength which the wearer of the uniform had just afforded them.

"*Mordioux!*" exclaimed the musketeer, "it is Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

La Vallière, bewildered by what had just happened and confounded by hearing her name pronounced, looked up and recognized D'Artagnan.

"Oh, Monsieur, it is indeed I!" and at the same time she seized hold of his arm. "You will protect me, M. d'Artagnan, will you not?" she added, in a tone of entreaty.

"Most certainly I will protect you; but in Heaven's name where are you going at this hour?"

"I am going to Chaillot."

"You are going to Chaillot by the way of La Rapée! Why, Mademoiselle, the truth is that you are turning your back to it."

"In that case, Monsieur, be kind enough to put me in the right way, and to go with me a short distance."

"Most willingly."

"But how does it happen that I find you here? By what merciful direction were you so near at hand to come to my assistance? I almost seem to be dreaming or to be losing my senses."

"I happened to be here, Mademoiselle, because I have a house in the Place de Grève, at the sign of the Notre Dame, the rent of which I went to collect yesterday, and where I in fact passed the night; and I also wished to be at the palace early, for the purpose of inspecting my posts."

"Thank you," said La Vallière.

"That is what *I* was doing," said D'Artagnan to himself; "but what was *she* doing, and why is she going to Chaillot at such an hour?" and he offered her his arm, which she took, and began to walk with increased speed, which concealed, however, great weakness. D'Artagnan perceived it, and proposed to La Vallière that she should rest; but she refused.

"You are ignorant, perhaps, where Chaillot is?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"Quite so."

"It is a great distance."

"That matters very little."

"It is at least a league."

"I can walk it."

D'Artagnan did not reply; he could tell, merely by the

tone of a voice, when a resolution was real or not. He rather bore along than accompanied La Vallière, until they perceived the elevated ground of Chaillot.

"To what house are you going, Mademoiselle?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"To the Carmelites, Monsieur."

"To the Carmelites?" repeated D'Artagnan, in no little amazement.

"Yes; and since Heaven has directed you to me to give me your support on my road, accept both my thanks and my adieux."

"To the Carmelites! Your adieux! Are you going to become a nun?" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Yes, Monsieur."

"What, you!!!"

There was in this "you," which we have marked by three notes of exclamation in order to render it as expressive as possible, — there was, we repeat, in this "you" a complete poem. It recalled to La Vallière her old recollections of Blois and her new recollections of Fontainebleau; it said to her, "*You*, who might be happy with Raoul, — *you*, who might be powerful with Louis, — *you* about to become a nun!"

"Yes, Monsieur," she said; "I am going to devote myself to the service of Heaven, and to renounce the world altogether."

"But are you not mistaken with regard to your vocation, — are you not mistaken in supposing it to be the will of Heaven?"

"No; since Heaven has permitted me to meet you. Had it not been for you, I should certainly have sunk from fatigue on the road; and since Heaven, I repeat, has thrown you in my way, it is because it has willed that I should carry out my intention."

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan, doubtingly, "that is a rather subtle argument, I think."

"Whatever it may be," returned the young girl, "I have acquainted you with the steps I have taken, and with my resolution. And now I have one last favor to ask of you, even while I return you my thanks. The king is entirely ignorant of my flight from the Palais-Royal, and is ignorant also of what I am about to do."

"The king ignorant, you say!" exclaimed D'Artagnan. "Take care, Mademoiselle; you do not consider the import of your action. No one ought to do anything with which the king is unacquainted, especially those who belong to the court."

"I no longer belong to the court, Monsieur."

D'Artagnan looked at the young girl with increasing astonishment.

"Do not be uneasy, Monsieur!" she continued. "I have well considered everything: and were it not so, it would now be too late to reconsider my resolution, — I have acted upon it."

"Well, Mademoiselle, what do you wish me to do?"

"In the name of that sympathy which misfortune inspires, by your generous feelings, and by your honor as a gentleman, I entreat you to swear to me one thing."

"Name it."

"Swear to me, M. d'Artagnan, that you will not tell the king that you have seen me, and that I am at the Carmelites."

"I will not swear that," said D'Artagnan, shaking his head.

"Why?"

"Because I know the king, I know you, I know myself even, — nay, the whole human race, — too well; no, no, I will not swear that!"

"In that case," cried La Vallière, with an energy of which one would hardly have thought her capable, "instead of the blessing which I should have implored for you until my dying day, I will invoke a curse, for you are rendering me the most miserable creature that ever lived."

We have already observed that D'Artagnan could easily recognize the accents of truth and sincerity, and he could not resist this last appeal. He saw by her face how bitterly she suffered from a feeling of degradation; he remarked her trembling limbs, how her whole slight and delicate frame was violently agitated by some internal struggle, and clearly perceived that resistance might be fatal. "I will do as you wish, then," he said. "Be satisfied, Mademoiselle; I will say nothing to the king."

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" exclaimed La Vallière; "you are the most generous of men." And in her extreme delight she seized hold of D'Artagnan's hands, and pressed them within her own.

D'Artagnan, who felt himself quite overcome, said: "This is touching, upon my word! Here is one who begins where others leave off."

And La Vallière, who in the extremity of her distress had sunk down and seated herself upon a stone, rose and walked towards the convent of the Carmelites, which could be seen looming up in the dawning light. D'Artagnan followed her at a distance. The door of the parlor was half open; she glided in like a shadow, and thanking D'Artagnan by a parting wave of the hand, disappeared from his sight.

When D'Artagnan found himself quite alone, he deliberated profoundly upon what had just taken place. "Upon my word," he said, "this looks very much like what is called a false position. To keep such a secret as that is to

keep a burning coal in one's pocket, and trust that it may not burn the stuff. And yet not to keep it when I have sworn to do so is dishonorable. It generally happens that some bright idea or other occurs to me as I am going along; but I am very much mistaken if I shall not now have to go a long way in order to find the solution of this affair. Yes, but which way to go? Oh! towards Paris, of course; that is the best way, after all. Only we must make haste; and in order to make haste, four legs are better than two, and I, unhappily, just now have only two. 'A horse, a horse!' as I heard them say at the theatre in London, — 'my kingdom for a horse!' And now I think of it, it need not cost me so much as that, for at the Barrière de la Conférence there is a guard of Musketeers; and instead of the one horse I need, I shall there find ten."

So, in pursuance of this resolution, which he had adopted with his usual rapidity, D'Artagnan immediately turned his back upon the heights of Chaillot, reached the guard-house, took the fastest horse he could find there, and was at the palace in ten minutes. It was striking five as he reached the Palais-Royal. The king, he was told, went to bed at his usual hour, after having been engaged with M. Colbert, and in all probability was still fast asleep. "Come," said D'Artagnan, "she spoke the truth, and the king is ignorant of everything; if he only knew one half of what has happened, the Palais-Royal by this time would be turned upside down."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SHOWING HOW LOUIS, ON HIS SIDE, HAD PASSED THE TIME FROM TEN TO HALF-PAST TWELVE AT NIGHT.

When the king left the apartment of the maids of honor, he found Colbert awaiting him in his cabinet to receive directions with regard to the next day's ceremony, as the king was then to receive the Dutch and Spanish ambassadors. Louis XIV. had serious causes of dissatisfaction with the Dutch; the States had already been guilty of many mean shifts and evasions in their relations with France, and without perceiving or without caring about the chances of a rupture, had again abandoned the alliance with his Most Christian Majesty, for the purpose of entering into all kinds of plots with Spain.

Louis XIV. at his accession — that is to say, at the death of Mazarin — had found this political question roughly sketched out. The solution was difficult for a young man; but as at that time the king represented the whole nation, anything that he resolved upon, the nation would be found ready to carry out. Any sudden impulse of anger, the reaction of young and hot blood to the brain, would be quite sufficient to change an old form of policy and to create another and a new system altogether. The part that diplomatists had to play in those days was that of arranging among themselves the different *coups-d'état* which their sovereign masters might wish to effect.

Louis was not in that calm state of mind in which he could determine upon a wise course of policy. Still much

agitated from the quarrel he had just had with La Vallière, he walked hastily into his cabinet, exceedingly desirous of finding an opportunity of producing an explosion after he had controlled himself for so long a time. Colbert, as he saw the king enter, knew the position of affairs at a glance, understood the king's intentions, and resolved therefore to manœuvre a little. When Louis requested to be informed what it would be necessary to say on the morrow, Colbert began by expressing his surprise that his Majesty had not been properly informed by M. Fouquet. "M. Fouquet," he said, "is perfectly acquainted with the whole of this Dutch affair; he receives all the correspondence himself direct."

The king, who was accustomed to hear M. Colbert find fault with M. Fouquet, allowed this remark to pass by unanswered, and merely listened. Colbert noticed the effect he had produced, and hastened to back out, saying that M. Fouquet was not on all occasions as blamable as at the first glance might seem to be the case, inasmuch as at that moment he was greatly occupied.

The king looked up. "To what do you allude?" he said.

"Sire, men are but men, and M. Fouquet has his defects as well as his great qualities."

"Ah! defects, — who is without them, M. Colbert?"

"Your Majesty is not," said Colbert, boldly; for he knew how to convey a good deal of flattery in a light amount of blame, like the arrow which cleaves the air notwithstanding its weight, thanks to the light feathers which bear it up.

The king smiled. "What defect has M. Fouquet, then?" he said.

"Still the same, Sire; it is said that he is in love."

"In love! with whom?"

"I am not quite sure, Sire; I have very little to do with matters of gallantry."

"At all events, you know, since you speak of it."

"I have heard a name mentioned."

"Whose?"

"I cannot now remember whose, but I think it is one of Madame's maids of honor."

The king started. "You know more than you like to say, M. Colbert," he murmured.

"I assure you, no, Sire."

"At all events Madame's maids of honor are all known; and in mentioning their names to you, you will perhaps recollect the one to which you allude."

"No, Sire."

"At least, try!"

"It would be useless, Sire. Whenever the name of any compromised lady is concerned, my memory is like a coffer of brass, the key of which I have lost."

A dark cloud seemed to pass over the mind as well as across the face of the king; then, wishing to appear master of himself, he said, shaking his head, "And now for the affair concerning Holland."

"In the first place, Sire, at what hour will your Majesty receive the ambassadors?"

"Early in the morning."

"Eleven o'clock?"

"That is too late, — say nine o'clock."

"That will be too early, Sire."

"For friends, that would be a matter of no importance, — one does what one likes with one's friends; but for one's enemies, in that case nothing could be better than if they were to feel hurt. I should not be sorry, I confess, to have to finish altogether with these marsh-birds, who annoy me with their cries."

"It shall be as your Majesty desires. At nine o'clock, therefore, — I will give the necessary orders. Is it to be a formal audience?"

"No. I wish to have an explanation with them, and not to embitter matters, — a thing that happens always when many persons are present; but at the same time I wish to clear everything with them, in order not to have to begin over again."

"Your Majesty will inform me of the persons whom you wish to be present at the reception."

"I will make a list of them. Let us speak of the ambassadors; what do they want?"

"Allies with Spain, they gain nothing; allies with France, they lose much."

"How is that?"

"Allied with Spain, they see themselves bounded and protected by the possessions of their allies; they cannot touch them, however anxious they may be to do so. From Antwerp to Rotterdam is but a step, and that by way of the Scheldt and the Meuse. If they wish to make a bite at the Spanish cake, you, Sire, the son-in-law of the King of Spain, could with your cavalry go from your dominions to Brussels in two days. Their design is, therefore, only to quarrel so far with you, and only to make you suspect Spain so far, that you will not interfere with their own affairs."

"It would be far more simple, then, I should think," replied the king, "to form a solid alliance with me, by means of which I should gain something, while they would gain everything."

"Not so; for if by chance they were to have you, or France rather, as a boundary, your Majesty is not an agreeable neighbor; young, ardent, warlike, the King of France might inflict some serious mischief on Holland, especially if he were to get near her."

"I perfectly understand, M. Colbert, and you have explained it very clearly; but be good enough to tell me the conclusion you have reached."

"Your Majesty's own decisions are never deficient in wisdom."

"What will these ambassadors say to me?"

"They will tell your Majesty that they are ardently desirous of forming an alliance with you, which will be a falsehood; they will tell the Spaniards that the three powers ought to unite so as to check the prosperity of England, and that will equally be a falsehood; for at present the natural ally of your Majesty is England, who has ships when you have none, — England, who can counteract Dutch influence in India, — England, in fact, a monarchical country, to which your Majesty is attached by ties of relationship."

"Good; but how would you answer?"

"I should answer, Sire, with the greatest possible moderation of tone, that Holland is not perfectly well disposed towards the King of France; that the symptoms of public feeling among the Dutch are alarming as regards your Majesty; that certain medals have been struck with insulting devices."

"Towards me!" exclaimed the young king, excitedly.

"Oh, no, Sire, no! 'insulting' is not the word. I was mistaken; I ought to have said 'immeasurably flattering for the Batavians.'"

"Oh, if that be so, the pride of the Batavians is a matter of indifference to me," said the king, sighing.

"Your Majesty is right, a thousand times right. However, it is never bad policy, your Majesty knows better than myself, to be unjust in order to obtain a concession. If your Majesty were to complain irascibly of the Dutch, you would appear to them of more considerable importance."

"What are those medals of which you speak?" inquired Louis; "for if I allude to them, I ought to know what to say."

"Upon my word, Sire, I cannot very well tell you, — some overweeningly conceited device, — that is the sense of it; the words have nothing to do with the thing itself."

"Very good, I will mention the word 'medal,' and they can understand it if they like."

"Oh, they will understand! Your Majesty can also slip in a few words about certain pamphlets which are in circulation."

"Never! Pamphlets befoul those who write them much more than those against whom they are written. M. Colbert, I thank you; you can leave me now. Do not forget the hour I have fixed, and be there yourself."

"Sire, I await your Majesty's list."

"True," returned the king; and he began to meditate. He did not think of the list in the slightest degree. The clock struck half-past eleven. The king's face revealed a violent conflict between pride and love. The political conversation had dispelled a good deal of the irritation which Louis had felt; and La Vallière's pale, worn features to his imagination spoke a very different language from that of the Dutch medals or the Batavian pamphlets. He sat for ten minutes debating within himself whether he should or should not return to La Vallière; but Colbert having respectfully insisted on having the list, the king blushed at thinking of love when business required his attention. He therefore dictated: the queen-mother, the queen, Madame, Madame de Motteville, Mademoiselle de Châtillon, Madame de Navailles; and for the men, Monsieur, Monsieur the Prince, M. de Grammont, M. de Manicamp, M. de Saint-Aignan, and the officers on duty.

"The ministers?" said Colbert.

"As a matter of course, and the secretaries also."

"Sire, I will go and prepare everything; the orders will be at the different residences to-morrow."

"Say rather to-day," replied Louis mournfully, as the clock struck twelve. It was the very hour when poor La Vallière was almost dying from anguish and bitter suffering. The king's attendants entered, it being the hour of his retiring to rest; the queen, indeed, had been waiting for more than an hour. Louis accordingly retired to his bedroom with a sigh; but as he sighed, he congratulated himself on his courage, and applauded himself for having been as firm in love as in affairs of State.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE AMBASSADORS.

D'ARTAGNAN had, with very few exceptions, learned all the particulars of what we have just been relating; for among his friends he reckoned all the useful, serviceable people in the royal household, — officious attendants, who were proud of being recognized by the captain of the Musketeers, for the captain's influence was very great; and then, in addition to any ambitious views they may have had, they were proud of the worth implied in a recognition by a man as brave as D'Artagnan.

In this manner D'Artagnan learned every morning what he had not been able either to see or to ascertain the night before, from the simple fact of his not being ubiquitous; so that, with the information he had been able by his own means to pick up during the day, and with what he had gathered from others, he succeeded in making up a bundle of weapons, which he untied as occasion might require to choose such as he judged necessary; his two eyes rendered him the same service as the hundred eyes of Argus. Political secrets, private secrets, hints or scraps of conversation dropped by the courtiers on the threshold of the royal antechamber, — he managed to discover and to put away everything in the vast and impenetrable tomb of his memory, by the side of those royal secrets so dearly bought and faithfully preserved.

D'Artagnan therefore knew of the king's interview with Colbert, and of the appointment made for the ambassadors

in the morning, and consequently he knew that the question of the medals would be brought up; and while he was constructing a conversation upon a few chance words which had reached his ears, he returned to his post in the royal apartments, so as to be there at the moment the king should awake. It happened that the king woke very early, — proving thereby that he too, on his side, had slept but indifferently. Towards seven o'clock he half opened his door very gently. D'Artagnan was at his post. His Majesty was pale, and seemed wearied; he had not, moreover, quite finished dressing.

"Send for M. de Saint-Aignan," he said.

De Saint-Aignan very probably was waiting for a summons; for the messenger, when he reached his apartment, found him already dressed. De Saint-Aignan hastened to the king in obedience to the summons. A moment afterwards the king and De Saint-Aignan passed by together, but the king walking first. D'Artagnan went to the window which looked out upon the courtyards; he had no need to put himself to the trouble of watching in what direction the king went, for he had no difficulty in guessing beforehand where his Majesty was going. The king, in fact, went towards the apartments of the maids of honor, — a circumstance which in no way astonished D'Artagnan, for he more than suspected, although La Vallière had not breathed a syllable on the subject, that the king had some kind of reparation to make. De Saint-Aignan followed him, as he had done the previous evening, rather less uneasy in his mind though still slightly agitated; for he trusted that at seven o'clock in the morning there might be only himself and the king awake among the august guests at the palace.

D'Artagnan stood at the window, calm and careless. One could almost have sworn that he noticed nothing, and

was utterly ignorant who were these two hunters after adventures who were passing across the courtyards wrapped up in their cloaks. And yet all the while that D'Artagnan appeared not to be looking at them at all, he did not for one moment lose sight of them, and while he whistled that old march of the Musketeers, which he rarely recalled except under great emergencies, he conjectured and prophesied how terrible would be the storm which would be raised on the king's return.

In fact, when the king entered La Vallière's apartment and found the room empty and the bed untouched, he began to be alarmed, and called out to Montalais, who immediately rushed in; but her astonishment was equal to the king's. All that she could tell his Majesty was that she had fancied she had heard La Vallière weep during a portion of the night, but knowing that his Majesty had returned, she had not dared to inquire what was the matter.

"But," inquired the king, "where do you suppose she has gone?"

"Sire," replied Montalais, "Louise is of a very sentimental disposition, and often have I seen her rise before daybreak in order to go out into the garden; she may perhaps be there now."

This appeared probable, and the king immediately ran down the staircase in order to go in search of the fugitive. D'Artagnan observed that he was very pale, while talking excitedly with his companion, as he went towards the gardens, De Saint-Aignan following him, quite out of breath. D'Artagnan did not stir from the window, but went on whistling, looking as if he saw nothing and yet seeing everything. "Well, well," he murmured, when the king had disappeared, "his Majesty's passion is stronger than I thought; he is now doing, I think, what he never did for Mademoiselle de Mancini."

In a quarter of an hour the king again appeared; he had looked everywhere, was completely out of breath, and as a matter of course had not discovered anything. De Saint-Aignan, who still followed him, was fanning himself with his hat, and in a gasping voice asking for information from such of the servants as were about, — in fact, from every one he met. He met Manicamp, who had arrived from Fontainebleau by easy stages; for while the others had performed the journey in six hours, he had taken four-and-twenty.

"Have you seen Mademoiselle de la Vallière?" De Saint-Aignan asked him.

Whereupon Manicamp, dreamy and absent as usual, answered, thinking that some one was asking him about De Guiche, "Thank you, the count is a little better." And he continued on his way until he reached the antechamber where D'Artagnan was, whom he asked to explain how it was that the king looked, as he thought, so wild; to which D'Artagnan replied that he was quite mistaken, — that the king, on the contrary, was as lively and merry as he could possibly be.

In the midst of all this, eight o'clock struck. It was usual for the king to take his breakfast at this hour, for the code of etiquette prescribed that the king should always be hungry at eight o'clock. His breakfast was laid upon a small table in his bedroom, and he ate very fast. De Saint-Aignan, of whom he would not lose sight, held the napkin for him. He then disposed of several military audiences, during which he despatched De Saint-Aignan to see what he could find out. Then, while he was still preoccupied, still anxious, still watching for De Saint-Aignan's return, who had sent out his servants in every direction to make inquiries, and had also gone himself,

the hour of nine struck, and the king forthwith passed into his cabinet.

At the first stroke of the clock the ambassadors themselves entered; and as it finished striking, the two queens and Madame made their appearance. There were three ambassadors from Holland, and two from Spain. The king glanced at them, and then bowed; and at the same moment De Saint-Aignan entered, — an entrance which the king regarded as far more important though in a different way than that of the ambassadors, however numerous they were, and from whatever country they came; and so, setting everything else aside, the king made a sign of interrogation to De Saint-Aignan, which the latter answered by a most decisive negative. The king almost entirely lost his courage; but as the queens, the members of the nobility who were present, and the ambassadors had their eyes fixed upon him, he overcame his emotion by a violent effort, and invited the latter to speak. Whereupon one of the Spanish deputies made a long oration, in which he boasted the advantages that the Spanish alliance would offer.

The king interrupted him, saying, "Monsieur, I trust that whatever is advantageous for France must be exceedingly advantageous for Spain."

This remark, and particularly the peremptory tone in which it was pronounced, made the ambassadors turn pale, and brought the color into the cheeks of the two queens, who both, being Spanish, felt their pride of relationship and nationality wounded by this reply.

The Dutch ambassador then began to speak in his turn, and complained of the prejudice which the king exhibited against the government of his country.

The king interrupted him, saying, "It is very singular, Monsieur, that you should come with any complaint,

when it is I, rather, who have reason to complain; and yet, you see, I do not."

"Complain, Sire?" asked the gentleman from Holland, "and in what respect?"

The king smiled bitterly. "Will you blame me, Monsieur," he said, "if I should happen to entertain suspicions against a government which authorizes and protects public insulters?"

"Sire!"

"I tell you," resumed the king, exciting himself from his own personal annoyance rather than from political grounds, "that Holland is a land of refuge for all who hate me, and especially for all who malign me."

"Oh, Sire!—"

"You wish for proofs, perhaps? Very good; they can be had easily enough. Whence proceed all those insulting pamphlets which represent me as a monarch without glory and without authority? Your printing-presses groan under their number. If my secretaries were here, I would mention the titles of the works as well as the names of the printers."

"Sire," replied the ambassador, "a pamphlet cannot be regarded as the work of a nation. Is it just, is it reasonable, that a great and powerful monarch like your Majesty should render a whole people responsible for the crime of a few madmen, who are dying of hunger?"

"That may be the case, I admit, Monsieur. But when the mint at Amsterdam strikes off medals which reflect disgrace upon me, is that also the crime of a few madmen?"

"Medals?" stammered the ambassador.

"Medals," repeated the king, looking at Colbert.

"Your Majesty," the ambassador ventured, "should be quite sure—"

The king still looked at Colbert; but Colbert appeared not to understand him, and maintained an unbroken silence, notwithstanding the king's repeated hints. D'Artagnan then approached the king, and taking a piece of money out of his pocket placed it in the king's hands, saying, "That is the medal to which your Majesty alludes."

The king looked at it, and with a glance which ever since he had become his own master had been always soaring in its gaze, could observe an insulting device representing Holland, like Joshua, arresting the progress of the sun, with this inscription, *In conspectu meo stetit sol.*

"'In my presence the sun stands still,'" exclaimed the king, furiously. "Ah, you will hardly deny it, now, I trust!"

"And the sun," said D'Artagnan, "is this," as he pointed to the panels of the cabinet, where the sun was brilliantly represented in every direction with this motto, *Nec pluribus impar.*

Louis's anger, increased by the bitterness of his own personal sufferings, hardly required this additional circumstance to foment it. Every one saw, from the kindling passion in the king's eyes, that an explosion was most imminent. A look from Colbert kept the storm from bursting forth. The ambassador ventured to frame excuses by saying that the vanity of nations was a matter of little consequence; that Holland was proud that with such limited resources she had maintained her rank as a great nation, even against powerful monarchs; and that if a little smoke had intoxicated his countrymen, the king would be so gracious as to excuse this intoxication.

The king seemed seeking for advice. He looked at Colbert, who remained impassive; then at D'Artagnan, who simply shrugged his shoulders, — a movement which was like the opening of the flood-gates whereby the king's

anger, which he had restrained for so long, was set free. As no one knew what direction his anger might take, all preserved a dead silence. The second ambassador took advantage of it to begin his excuses also. While he was speaking, and while the king, who had again gradually returned to his own personal reflections, listened to the voice, full of nervous anxiety, with the air of an absent man listening to the murmuring of a cascade, D'Artagnan, on whose left hand De Saint-Aignan was standing, approached the latter, and in a voice well calculated to reach the king's ears, said, "Have you heard the news, Count?"

"What news?" said De Saint-Aignan.

"Why, about La Vallière?"

The king started, and involuntarily advanced a step nearer to them.

"What has happened to La Vallière?" inquired De Saint-Aignan, in a tone which can very easily be imagined.

"Ah, poor girl!" said D'Artagnan; "she is going to take the veil."

"The veil!" exclaimed De Saint-Aignan.

"The veil!" cried the king, in the midst of the ambassador's discourse; but then, mindful of the rules of etiquette, he mastered himself, still listening however with rapt attention.

"What order?" inquired De Saint-Aignan.

"The Carmelites of Chaillot."

"Who the deuce told you that?"

"She did herself."

"You have seen her, then?"

"It was I who escorted her to the Carmelites."

The king did not lose a word; his blood boiled within him, and his face began to flush.

"But what was the cause of her flight?" inquired De Saint-Aignan.

"Because the poor girl was driven away from the court yesterday," replied D'Artagnan.

He had no sooner said this than the king, with an authoritative gesture, said to the ambassador, "Enough, Monsieur, enough!" Then, advancing towards the captain, he exclaimed, "Who says that La Vallière is going to take the religious vows?"

"M. d'Artagnan," answered the favorite.

"Is it true what you say?" said the king, turning towards the musketeer.

"As true as truth itself."

The king clinched his hands, and turned pale. "You added something further, M. d'Artagnan," he said.

"I know nothing more, Sire."

"You added that Mademoiselle de la Vallière had been driven away from the court."

"Yes, Sire."

"Is that true also?"

"Ascertain it for yourself, Sire."

"And from whom?"

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan, like a man declining to say anything further.

The king gave a violent start, regardless of ambassadors, ministers, courtiers, and politics. The queen-mother rose; she had heard everything, or if she had not heard everything, she had guessed it. Madame, almost fainting from anger and fear, endeavored to rise as the queen-mother had done; but she sank down again upon her chair, which by an involuntary movement she made roll back.

"Messieurs," said the king, "the audience is over. I will communicate my answer, or rather my will, to Spain and to Holland;" and with an imperious gesture he dismissed the ambassadors.

"Take care, my son," said the queen-mother, indignantly, "take care! You are hardly master of yourself, I think."

"Ah, Madame," roared the young lion, with a terrible gesture, "if I am not master of myself, I will be, I promise you, of those who do me outrage! Come with me, M. d'Artagnan, come!" and he left the room in the midst of general stupefaction and dismay.

The king hastily descended the staircase, and was about to cross the courtyard.

"Sire," said D'Artagnan, "your Majesty mistakes the way."

"No; I am going to the stables."

"That is useless, Sire, for I have horses ready for your Majesty."

The king's only answer was a look; but this look promised more than the ambition of three D'Artagnans could have dared to hope.

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